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THE SKY DETECTIVES; or, A Boy's Fight for Life and Honor.

BY MAJOR MICKEY FREE.



JACK HAYS AND HIS MEN, SEEING THEIR VICTIM THUS ESCAPING, RODE FORWARD AT A FURIOUS SPEED, FIRING AS THEY RAN.

The Sky Detectives;

OR,

A Boy's Fight for Life and Honor.

BY MAJOR MICKEY FREE.

CHAPTER I.

THE ACCUSATION.

THE "Diggers' Delight," the largest, flashiest saloon in the mining town of Golden Gulch, was crowded with miners and gamblers when a man walked in and shouted:

"There's a thief in camp!"

No more startling announcement than this could have been made.

Had the man announced the killing of somebody, he would not have made much of a scene.

Deaths were common, but thefts were very rare. A murderer might easily escape the consequences of his deed, alleging a quarrel, or self-defense, but a thief detected was sure of being strung up. Therefore, the miners at once started up, left the bar and their games of cards, and crowded around the man who had made the startling statement.

The machinery in the principal mine of Golden Gulch was being repaired, and the large force of miners were having a holiday.

"What's the matter, Simpson?"

"Who's the thief?"

"What have you lost?"

"Have you caught him?"

Simpson held up his hand to enjoin silence.

"Let me tell you," he said. "I'd got a nice lot o' nuggets and dust, and a week ago I sold 'em to one of the men at Wells, Fargo & Co.'s. I got the cash fur the stuff, five hundred dollars in gold, and that same amount, in a canvas bag, has been took from my cabin this mornin'."

The intelligence was received with very gloomy countenances by the men about the speaker.

A thief was much dreaded. They had no banks and no detectives. They were thus forced to depend upon the mutual honesty of the dwellers in the camp for the security of their hard-earned savings.

"Who do yer suspect?" was the cry.

Simpson was silent.

There was a movement in the crowd, and a tall man, who seemed to be about thirty years of age, pushed his way to the front.

"Boys," he said, "you know me. I'm Dick Crowell, and I'm the man that shares Simpson's cabin. Naturally I'm the man to be suspected. Now, here is what I've got to say:

"A hundred to one that money is still in the town, stowed away in some snug corner of a cabin. I'm going to search the town and try to find that money. It must have been taken by a neighbor who saw Simpson hiding it away, and a hundred to one we'll find it in the house of a neighbor. Who'll help me in this search?"

"I will."

"And I."

"Let's all help," suggested somebody, and the cry was taken up:

"Yes; let's all go."

With Dick Crowell and Simpson at their head, the aroused miners left the "Diggers' Delight."

To their way of thinking, theft was the worst crime in the calendar, and the one meriting the quickest punishment.

"Where shall we begin?" asked Simpson.

"Next to your own shanty," returned Dick Crowell. "We'll visit all your neighbors the first thing."

"Here we are, then," said one, pausing before the door of an humble cottage. "Let's rap at the door."

"Hold on!" cried a miner.

"Why?" demanded Crowell.

"Because there's only Ben Bradley and his sister there."

"What of it? The boy's no better than anybody else, and as I'm going to search every—"

At that moment the door was flung open and Ben Bradley appeared. He was seventeen, and as tall, broad-shouldered, and strong as most of the men who stood at his door.

Behind him in the doorway stood his sister, Annie, a most charming girl of sixteen.

Ben looked astonished when he saw the crowd of men at his door, and his wonder was turned to alarm when he noted their stern looks.

With the promptness acquired by life in the mines, Ben drew his revolver and cocked it.

"What are you doing here with such black looks?" he demanded.

"Well, yer see," spoke up Simpson, "I've lost a bag of money."

"Curse your tongue!" cried the hot-blooded boy. "Do you dare accuse me?" and he drew a bead upon Simpson, his eyes flashing wrathfully.

"Hold on, Ben; don't do nothing yer might be sorry for," interposed Jim Ballston, a miner, who was a warm friend to the boy and his sister. "Yer see, a bag o' money has been stolen, and we're going to search everybody's cabin, to see if we can get hold of it, and square Dick Crowell's character, seein' as how he thinks that spicin' points to him."

"All right, then; go ahead," assented the boy. "I'm sure I can stand all the searching. Only be careful not to break anything, and remember that a lady is present."

Ben was regarded as powerful, quick as a cat, and as good a shot as there was in the mines, so all hands paid respectful attention to his admonition.

Half a dozen of them entered the cabin, and began searching in all likely and unlikely places for the stolen treasure.

Meanwhile the balance of the curious lot of men stood around, waiting for the result of the search.

A yell from one of the men made them all crowd into the doorway.

The man who had uttered the cry was bending over the fireplace. He had removed three loose bricks, and was now holding up a bag made of canvas!

"Is this it?" he asked.

"Yes," shrieked Simpson, swooping down upon the prize like a hawk, and snatching it from the finder's hands. "I kin swear to it!"

A hoarse growl, an ominous murmur arose from the miners.

"The thief!"

"The sly dog!"

"We're none of us safe, now."

"We will be, though," cried another, "for we'll hang him!"

A murmur of approbation went up from the majority.

They made a united movement toward Ben, who sprung back and placed his shoulders against the rear wall of the cabin.

In an instant a revolver gleamed in either hand, and the boy's resolute tones rung through the cabin like the notes of a bugle-blast:

"Stand back! I am as innocent of theft as any of you. I know nothing whatever of this charge! There is some devilish trick in this, or that bag could never have been where it was. I am innocent, and you shall not hold me responsible!"

His blazing eyes were fixed sternly upon his accusers. His hands, armed in so deadly a manner, were half raised, ready to deal out death if the young hero was assailed.

"There ain't no plan nor trick about this," cried Simpson. "Now that I come to think of it, yer've been hanging about my shanty ever since I sold the nuggets and dust."

Again that hoarse, angry murmur went up.

"It's a lie!" savagely cried Ben. "I have not been near your shanty."

"String the young whelp up, and so protect your property," said Crowell.

That was the great appeal to make to men when confronted with a person who seemed convicted of theft.

"Yes, string him up!"

"All together!"

"Upon him!"

"Stand back!" cried Ben. "I will sell my life dearly!"

But they kept on their way.

Crack! crack! rung out the sharp reports of the revolvers, and two of his assailants went down.

Again the weapons pealed forth and two more were wounded.

But, of course, the boy could not hold his own against such odds as were opposed to him.

A dozen strong hands seized him and bore him down to the floor, where his weapons were rudely torn from his clinging grasp.

Unobserved by the others, Annie stole out of the cabin, her beautiful eyes blazing like twin stars.

"Away with him!" said Crowell, who had made himself leader, "away with the thief to the valley and hang him to the big trees."

The bound and gagged boy—for some cruel hand had gagged him by forcing a large cork into his mouth—was hurried away.

"Get a horse and a rope," suggested somebody.

"All right," was the cry, and half a dozen started off for the required things. "We'll be there lively."

Ben was rushed out of town to the valley that

bordered it, and brought to a halt under a cluster of trees.

Here the few hangings that had fallen to the lot of Golden Gulch in the few years of its existence had taken place.

A tall tree was the favored gallows, and under this the party halted.

"Up with the young thief!" was the cry.

"Let him talk if he wants," suggested one of the more humane.

"Yes, you thief, confess your guilt before you die."

But poor Ben couldn't speak because of the gag in his mouth.

"He's obstinate."

"Yes, he's hardened."

"String him up and let's be done with the job!"

They had to wait but a short time for the horse and the rope they needed. The line was brought, the noose was made and slipped over the head of the doomed boy. Then he was placed on the horse, the animal situated directly beneath the lowest overhanging branch. The noose was drawn quite tight, and the slack end was made fast to the trunk of the tree.

When the horse moved away from the tree Ben Bradley would be left in the air suspended by his neck!

"All ready?" asked Dick Crowell, who held a whip in his hand.

"Yes; all ready!"

"Then here goes!"

Crowell was about to raise the whip and strike the horse when something fell from the tree and alighted fairly on the haunches of the animal.

At once a lightning-like change took place in the lawless scene.

CHAPTER II.

DOUBLY RESCUED!

It was Annie Bradley who had dropped from the tree.

The shrewd girl had left the cabin in advance of the mob, and knowing where the hangings all took place, had secreted herself amid the very ample foliage of the tree.

She had dropped first from an upper branch to the one over which the rope had been thrown. When she dropped down from the lower branch she had the rope grasped in her left hand.

In her right hand gleamed a long, sharp knife, and ere her feet fairly struck the back of the horse, she had cut the line with one swift sweep of the shining blade.

When her feet struck the horse she did not try to cling to the animal, but dropped in safety to the ground, while the steed, in great alarm, bounded away at his top speed, bearing Ben with him.

The boy's hands were bound, and he was not able to speak, but that did not prevent him from keeping a firm seat upon the back of the frightened brute, who tore over the plain as only fright could have made him do.

The whole affair had been such an utter surprise to the bystanders, and had been so quickly executed, that for a minute not one of them moved or spoke.

They could scarcely realize that both horse and prisoner were gone, leaving behind only the neatly cut rope to show that a hanging had been interrupted by the courageous act of the beautiful girl who now stood watching her loved brother's escape.

But when the first shock of surprise was over, a storm of curses were leveled at the girl, and any number of orders were shouted forth:

"Stop him!"

"After him!"

"Shoot him down!"

But it was neither very easy to shoot him down nor to stop him, and as for going after him on foot, that seemed to hold out but a slim possibility of recapture.

At that moment, when the fugitive on horseback bade fair to leave his enemies on foot far in the rear, the thundering tramp of many hoofs was heard, and a score of mounted men, all resolute-looking fellows, came into view.

A shout went up from a dozen or more throats:

"That's Jack Hays!"

And, indeed, the short, strongly-built man who rode at the head of the troop, was the celebrated sheriff, one of the pluckiest men who ever kept order among the mines, a man whose deeds of daring and cool courage in the discharge of his duty is still warmly spoken of by the pioneers.

The little sheriff dashed up to the gallows-tree, and drew rein.

"Is that man a prisoner?" he asked pointing after Ben, who was fast receding in the distance.

"He was," said somebody. "Stole a bag of money. After him!"

"I will. Follow!"

The last words were addressed to his men, and away dashed the sheriff and his posse.

The horse on which Ben was mounted was a very ordinary sort of a nag, and the sheriff and his men were supplied with the best of stock; hence they naturally gained rapidly upon the inferior nag, and soon lessened the distance between them and the object of their pursuit.

"Langley," said Hays to one of his expert marksmen: "shoot that horse!"

Langley produced an immense revolver that carried a bullet large enough for a gun, took a careful aim, and fired.

He succeeded, for the fugitive steed fell to the plain, his rider rolling off without injury.

In a moment Ben was on his feet, and running for dear life; but, how could he hope to escape the mounted men?

These latter, now assured of their prey, set up a loud shout.

"My God," panted the boy, as he dashed on, "am I to be killed by these roughs for a crime I know nothing of? Is this the justice of Heaven that—"

He had involuntarily cast his eyes aloft, and the sight that met his eye stopped the impious words on his lips.

A large balloon, a monster ship of the air, was descending swiftly toward the earth and seemed to be about to strike the plain a few hundred yards in advance of the bewildered Ben.

In the ample car of the balloon stood two people, a boy of about Ben Bradley's age, and a big Irishman with a head of fiery red hair.

The young balloonist had his hand on the valve balyard, while the big man from the Emerald Isle had a coil of cord in his hands, and as Ben looked up the Irishman uttered a loud shout and threw down the slender strand.

It was made of silk, a mere string it looked, but it would easily bear the weight of a heavy man.

At the lower end was a noose or loop, large enough to encircle a barrel of ordinary size. This noose just swept the ground as it hung pendent from the hands of the Irishman.

The balloon, under the skillful hand of the boy in the car, was held almost at a standstill.

Realizing that this movement meant attempted rescue, Ben's hopes revived and he dashed on toward the hanging cord of silk.

At the same moment his pursuers caught sight of the balloon, and the majority of them drew rein in utter astonishment.

Ben's hands were tied, but he thrust his head through the noose, allowed it to fall nearly to his waist, and then ran backward.

This tightened the slip-knot, and brought him in full view of the man and boy in the car.

The next instant he was pulled from the ground. The Irishman was drawing him up to the car.

Jack Hayes and his men, seeing their victim thus escaping, rode forward at furious speed, firing as they ran with revolver and rifle.

But the young aeronaut, with a single movement of his hand, sent the big air-ship flying swiftly upward until, catching in a westerly current, it dashed away with more than race-horse speed.

With a hand-over-hand movement the powerful Irishman drew Ben up to the side of the car, the youthful aeronaut hanging far out on the other side in order to maintain some degree of balance.

It was a queer journey for Ben, and created strange sensations in his mind; and he was heartily glad when a big hand clutched him and drew him into the car.

"There ye are, and it's a solid lump of a gossoon ye are, too," averred the athletic Irishman, as he dropped the rescued lad on the floor of the car and took off the noose. "Be Heavens, ye weigh more nor sixteen ounces to the pound, I'm thinking."

The balloonist came forward, and with a keen knife severed the cords that bound Ben's wrists.

Then Ben plucked the gag from his mouth, sat upright, and looked gratefully at his deliverers.

Ben, as the Irishman had said, was a solid lump, and was indeed heavily and strongly built.

But the young balloonist was of such an unusually fine build that Ben could hardly repress

his admiration. The lad was apparently about eighteen, tall, light in weight, with a swelling chest that denoted ample wind, and his arms, which were bare, seemed covered with muscles that glided up and down under the smooth skin with every movement.

His sleeveless shirt was open at the throat, and exposed a chest supplied with a regular network of muscles. Altogether the young fellow presented the appearance of a slender but wonderfully strong athlete, with the muscles of a gladiator, and the wind of a champion runner.

The bright blue eyes of the young air-traveler frankly met the admiring gaze of the boy he had rescued.

"Who are you?" asked the aeronaut.

"Ben Bradley."

"And what are you?"

"A miner. I live in the mining-town of Golden Gulch with my sister. Our parents are dead. Some enemy of mine put up a job on me, and had me arrested for theft. I was escaping from a mob of lynchers when you came to my rescue."

"And you swear that you are innocent of the charge?" searchingly inquired the balloonist.

"As innocent as you are."

"I believe you," warmly said the other. "Here is my hand. My name is Harley Willis."

Their hands met in a friendly grasp, and thus began a warm bond of mutual attachment.

"Permit Denny Malone to introduce himself," said the jovial Irishman.

"I owe my life to both of you," gratefully said Ben, and shook the big Irishman heartily by the hand. Then turning to the boy, he asked:

"Is this balloon yours?"

"Yes," proudly answered Harley; "my own property. I am the son of a wealthy New Yorker, who permits me to do just as I please. My taste runs in science, and I have devoted the past three years to study and experiment. I had this balloon constructed after a long and careful study of the science of air navigation, and now I can roam thousands of miles at will, over land and sea, without a dollar for traveling expenses, and asking nobody's leave to come or go when and where I will. It's a grand life! I can travel hundreds of miles in a day!"

Ben's eyes sparkled. The words of the young aeronaut thrilled him.

"But you encounter storms?"

"I rise above them, and sail along in the bright sunlight while the storm rages and rains below."

"But your supply of gas cannot last long," persisted Ben, who had read some facts on ballooning. "You soon lose it by descending several times."

"I don't lose any," answered Willis. "By the aid of a small battery and various chemicals I expand or contract the gas in the bag at a moment's notice. Thus I can ascend or descend without losing any of the original supply. The invention is a French one."

"But where are you taking me now?" asked Ben Bradley.

"Nowhere in particular."

"Will you take me back to Golden Gulch?"

"Certainly. All places are alike to Denny and me. By the way, when I caught the first view of you, you were mounted on horseback, and the animal was shot down by one of your pursuers."

"I'll explain," said Ben. "They placed me on the horse with the noose of a rope about my neck, intending to whip the horse from under me and leave me high in the air."

"Oh, you were nearer death than I thought. How did you escape them?"

"My brave sister Annie, sixteen years old, rescued me," said Ben, and then told how heroically the girl had executed the daring deed.

Harley Willis's eyes flashed fire at the mere narration.

"I want to see that girl," he said, his face flushed with admiration of this unknown heroine. "Denny, send her along toward Golden Gulch as soon as you can find a current."

"I will, sor," said Denny, who assisted in handling the balloon. "Be Heavens! and it's myself that wants to see this brave colleen, so I do."

"What are you going to do when you get to Golden Gulch?" asked Harley.

"Try to see my sister; and get her to remain where she is until I can clear up this blot on my honor, or else establish a home elsewhere," answered Ben. "To tell you the truth, I've lately found a bonanza."

"A bonanza?"

"Yes, the richest kind of a mine, but difficult to get at and work. I think I'm the only one that knows anything about it."

"What sort of a mine is it?"

"A stream that runs through a narrow canyon of rock. The bed of the stream is one mass of gold-dust, the deposit of thousands of years. If I can reach it, and get it away, then I shall be rich enough to hunt down the cruel wretch who murdered my father and mother, and also the cowardly brute who tried to have me lynched to-day."

"This gold-bedded stream is at the bottom of a rock pass?" said Harley.

"Yes."

"How wide is the pass?"

"About sixty feet."

"Then the Sky Traveler—that's the name of the balloon—could easily descend between the cliffs, anchor at the side of the stream, and carry away a load of pure gold-dust."

"Why not?" cried Ben, his eyes snapping at the proposition. "It's just exactly the thing. But how much gold could you carry away?"

"In addition to the passengers up to the number of five, and my ordinary amount of stores, I could carry at least five hundred pounds of gold. That would make half a dozen persons independently wealthy for life."

"And you'll do it?" asked Ben.

"You bet!" answered Harley Willis. "I have no objection to getting rich."

"Be heavens, and it's myself that don't despise gold," said Denny Malone. "Och, but I'll drink and dance wid the best in the land when I'm rich. I'll marry Biddy Maguire, and have fourteen small childers, and a horse, and dogs, and—"

"All right, Denny," laughingly interrupted the young balloonist. "You can have all these things in your mind; but we haven't got our hands on the gold yet. Don't count your chickens before they're hatched."

Then Harley Willis turned to Ben:

"You don't look like a native of these parts. I should say that you came from somewhere in the North. I dare say, you have a history."

"And you are right," returned Ben. "Would you like to hear the story of my life?"

"Indeed, I would," was the answer. "While we are bowling along nothing would please me better."

"My history is a brief, but bitter one," began Ben. "Like yourself, I am a New York boy, and grew up to the age of thirteen in the heart of the great city."

"My father, Mark Bradley, was a man of considerable means. He had an excellent business when I was a little boy; but, somehow, before I was ten years of age, he suddenly became poor. My sister and I did not know the reason of his sudden fall, and as we were little children, we were kept ignorant of the cause."

"I can remember that my father was in two or three different businesses after he lost his fine store, but that we still kept poor, and luck, evidently, was against him. So things went on until I was nearly fourteen years old."

"Then father determined to emigrate to the mines, intending to start a store. We came on the railroads as far as they went, and then joined a wagon-train. We were four in number, my father, my mother, my sister Annie, and me. Father was hopeful, and we were all very happy together."

"We had gone some distance on our wagon-route, and one evening were going into camp at a small grove, when Sim Tree, our guide, had his suspicions aroused by the queer actions of his horse. The animal threw up its head, snuffed the air in a peculiar manner, and then neighed."

"Jumpin' snakes!" said Tree, who was a very experienced guide, "thar hain't been no sign of Injuns about—yes, by crikey, thar is some around yere. Attention! Every man grip his gun. Form a circle of the wagons. Women and children flat down in the middle. Lively!"

"We all sprung to obey his orders, and in very short order the circle was formed, the frightened women and children lying flat on the grass, and the men, pale but determined, standing erect behind the barricade, their loaded weapons in their hands."

"I was only a boy, but I insisted on being allowed to fight, and a loaded revolver was placed in my hands."

"Sim Tree was looking out over the plain in all directions, while we stood there in silence, hoping the alarm might prove a false one. Suddenly the old guide threw up his rifle, took a quick aim, and fired. At the same instant a tall, painted Indian leaped up from the tall

grass a hundred yards away, and then fell dead upon the plain.

"That shot, and the death of the Indian, was a signal for the attack. A moment later our foes sprung up on all sides, and rushed toward the wagons, yelling and screaming. I could see that they outnumbered our party, and so could the guide.

"They're two to one!" he yelled. "Let every blow tell. Use pistols, knives, and clubbed guns after you fire. All together now. Fire!"

"Then we poured a volley into them as they came on, and with good effect, but we did not succeed in stopping them. In an instant they were trying to break through the irregular barricade, and the fight became hand to hand.

"Three different Indians tried to cut me down, and each time I dropped my opponent with a bullet from my revolver. On all sides the scene now defied description, and blood was flowing like water. I turned to look after my mother and sister.

"I was just in time to see a murderous fellow rush upon my mother, seize her by the hair, raise a long knife on high, and stab her to the heart! I raised my revolver to shoot him down, when I was knocked over by a chance blow, some flying object hitting me on the head. Before I fell, however, I had taken note of the fact that under the red war-paint on the cheeks of the murderer, patches of white skin were visible, and I realized in a moment that he was a white man in disguise!

"When I got upon my feet again, I looked about for him, but in vain. I ran to my mother, but, alas! she was dead. Mad with rage and grief I clutched my pistol firmly, and darted in and out among the combatants, looking for the murderer of my mother. It appeared that he, in turn, was looking for my father, and when I caught sight of him he was just crossing blades with my parent. I shall never forget my father's words, the last I ever heard him utter.

"'Monster,' he cried, 'I know you! Unnatural demon, you are false to your own blood, and if this good knife—'

"I heard no more. An Indian attacked me. As I shot my assailant in the neck, I saw my father falling under the knife of my mother's murderer. The right sleeve of the renegade had been ripped open, and on his white arm, plainly marked on the skin, I saw a black cross! By that mark, should I ever meet him, I shall be able to identify the slayer of my parents.

"It is needless to annoy you with the further details of that battle which made Annie and me orphans. The emigrants triumphed at length, and the Indians were driven off with great loss. The whites had many killed and wounded, and the Indians left a score of dead upon the field.

"I found my sister hidden in one of the wagons, and together we helped to bury our parents in one grave. The next day the train went on its way, and I possessed my father's little store of goods. When we got to Golden Gulch Annie and I left the train, and as I was too young for business, I sold off the goods and bought a little house to live in.

"Here we have been living for three years, Annie keeping house for me while I've been making a living for both, working in the mines. As I told you, I had found a bonanza, and prosperity seemed to be within reach, when suddenly this trumped-up charge of theft was made against me. I want to go back there and clear my name, and then, with wealth to aid me, I'll search for the murderer of my parents, and if I find him—"

"Danger!" suddenly broke in Harley, seizing a loaded rifle. "Look ahead!"

CHAPTER III.

CROWELL'S LITTLE PLAN.

FILLED with astonishment, and unable to talk of anything else but the wonderful double rescue, the lynchers returned to the town and thronged the Diggers' Delight again, the one marvelous occurrence the theme of every tongue.

"He'd never got away from the sheriff only for the balloon."

"Sure not; and now you bet we'll never see him again."

So the talk went on, with whisky and tobacco to fill up the spaces.

Dick Crowell was there, gnawing moodily at his mustache, and evidently much out of temper. He was glaring around when he caught sight of a short, thick-set man, whose snaky eyes never met anybody's gaze in an honest manner.

Crowell crossed the room to where this very treacherous fellow was sitting.

"Johnson."

"Yes."

"We missed on the boy, just through that cursed balloon, and we mustn't take any chances with the girl."

"I can get her to the right spot without any trouble," said Johnson.

"Sure?"

"Yes, sure. I'll wager she'll be at the old spot within half an hour from now if you want her."

"You can just bet that I do," said Dick Crowell, his eyes sparkling. "I don't think we'll be troubled with that boy around here any more; and if we get the girl away clean I shall consider it a pretty decent job after all. Where is she?"

"I followed her to the cabin, and saw her go in."

"Then carry out your plan, whatever it is, and I'll be waiting for you. Go out first and I'll leave in a minute or two. It's just as well not to attract attention if it can be avoided."

Away went Johnson, and in a short time thereafter Dick Crowell also left the smoky atmosphere of the Diggers' Delight.

Pretty Annie Bradley, feeling quite happy at her brother's escape from hanging, was bustling about her cabin-home, and wondering when she would see Ben again, when there came a light rap at the door.

Annie was far from being timid or nervous as city girls are. Her residence in the camp had made her as plucky and self-reliant as any girl in the West. Without hesitation she at once opened the door.

The man who stood there was a stranger to her.

He looked cautiously around before he opened his lips.

"Are you Annie Bradley?" he asked in a low tone.

"Yes, I am Annie Bradley."

"Bend your head down. I don't want anybody to hear me. The balloon has come down, miss."

Annie's eyes snapped.

"Where is it?"

"Outside the town about half a mile from here. I've got a cabin there."

"And he's safe?" eagerly asked Annie.

"Yes'm, and he wants you to come to him because he's afraid to come to you," said the man. "Put on your hat and I'll take you there."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" gratefully said the girl.

"You needn't thank me," said the other. "I am paid for my work."

And had Annie been the least bit on her guard she would have detected the evil sneer in his tones.

On went her hat, and out of the house she went, following a short distance behind her guide.

Everybody was at the Diggers' Delight, talking over the news, and there was not a soul to note the girl's departure.

A brisk walk of ten minutes brought the guide, who was the man Johnson, to a clump of trees.

"Right in here," said Johnson, and Annie strode in among the trees.

"Why, the balloon isn't here!" she said. "Did they say—"

"They said they would be right here," said a voice in her ear, "and here they are, my pretty darling."

And as the words were spoken she was caught in the embrace of Dick Crowell, who laughed triumphantly.

"One kiss from those pretty red lips, and then away we go," said Crowell, and tried to press his lips against hers.

Taken completely by surprise, Annie was almost incapable of resistance at first, but when she saw the lips of the scheming rascal approaching hers, she twisted about in a violent manner, and succeeded in escaping from Dick's embrace.

"Seize her, Johnson!" cried Crowell. "Tie her hand and foot, and away with her!"

Johnson made a forward movement to obey the order.

"Stop!"

Clear as a bugle note rung out the order, resolute, imperative.

And when Johnson saw that the girl had drawn a short, broad-bladed knife from a secret pocket, he considerably did halt.

"I warn you not to approach me," said the girl. "I was taught by a Spaniard how to

throw the knife. I never miss my aim. If you come one step nearer you'll get this knife in your body."

Confident in her skill, the border heroine stood coolly on guard.

Dick Crowell's taunting laugh rung out in loud, sneering tones;

"Afraid of a girl, Johnson?" he said.

The brute seemed stung to madness by the taunt. He leaped forward.

The broad-bladed knife lay in Annie's right palm, point reversed.

With a lightning like half sweep of her arm, Annie threw the knife.

Like a blue streak it went through the air, and lodged in the breast of the brutal and foolhardy Johnson!

Down he went on the greensward, the blood staining the grass.

"Curse you!" cried Crowell, his face ablaze with passion; "I'll teach you, you young she devil!"

And he darted forward to grasp Annie, believing her to be defenseless, but he was brought up short by another ringing order:

"Halt! for your life!"

And then he beheld, to his intense chagrin, a small, well-made revolver shining in the girl's extended right hand.

"You would not dare shoot!" muttered the villain.

"I'd shoot you quicker than I would a dog," was the cool reply.

The rascal stood undecided, and the brave girl settled the matter for him.

"Dick Crowell," she said, "you are the man who pestered me with your attentions until I told you I hated you. Then you plotted my brother into trouble, and very nearly succeeded in hanging him. If you are taking all this trouble on my account I can tell you that you are wasting your time, for you'll never do as you please with me you cowardly villain!"

"I'm only a sixteen-year-old girl, Crowell, but I've got just such accomplishments as a girl should have who lives in a camp of miners. My skill with the knife you have seen, and to show you that I am not less expert with the revolver, I'll give you a sample with powder and ball. This will not hurt you, but it will serve to remind you of this day for some time to come."

Almost before she ceased speaking the little beauty raised her revolver slightly, and with a remarkably rapid aim, pulled the trigger.

Simultaneously with the report of the pistol, Dick Crowell's hat was thrown from his head by the flying bullet.

The beauty of Golden Gulch smiled, while the astonished rascal nervously felt of the top of his head presumably to see if it had not been removed.

"You see that you can't get the best of me, so you'd better tackle some other girl," advised Annie Bradley. "Now you attempt to follow me, and my next bullet shall split your cowardly heart."

And the baffled villain was forced to let her depart, with the taunting advice:

"Tackle some other girl, Dick—tackle some other girl."

CHAPTER IV.

FIGHTING IN THE CLOUDS!

The cry of "danger" that pealed from the lips of Harley Willis cause Ben Bradley to look up in alarm.

Three large eagles, with broad wings, long, wicked beaks, and cruel-looking claws, were sweeping down upon the balloon, uttering harsh screams that seemed to be inspired by anger.

The immense birds approached to within a certain distance of the Sky Traveler, and then wheeled about, still uttering their angry shrieks.

"Are they dangerous?" asked Ben, as he picked up a rifle from the socket in which it rested.

"Yes. On the solid earth they would not annoy us; here, however, they seem to look upon the Sky Traveler as an intruder, and I am constantly in fear that they'll tackle the balloon."

"Could they injure it?"

"Why, with their sharp claws, and their immensely strong beaks, they could make ribbons of the Sky Traveler."

"And down we'd go!"

"Yes, and probably never know where we landed. Oh, here they come again, the screaming rascals."

The birds seemed angry, and yet loth to attack the balloon.

Shrieking out their hoarse cries, the big kings of the air rushed hither and thither, keeping the voyagers in constant alarm.

"Be heavens," said Malone, "and it's not me that loikes the look o' them. 'Worra, but they'd tear me eyes out, the haythens."

Just at that momeut one of the birds made a straight dive toward the travelers in the car, and the alarmed Irishman hastily fired his rifle.

It was a hasty, and perhaps unnecessary shot, but the Irishman was alarmed, and did not stop to think that shooting one of the number might incense the other two to revengeful acts.

Such, however, was the result.

Dennis Malone's shot was a fair one, and badly wounded the eagle, who uttered a succession of short, piercing cries, and then slowly whirled over and over and began to descend toward the far-distant earth.

"Now we're in for it," declared Harley.

And he was right.

The other two eagles seemed maddened by the fate of their companion, and with shrill screams they darted upon the occupants of the car.

So swift were the huge birds in their circling movements, that the marksmen within the car were unable to take a good aim, and their shots went wide of the mark.

An instant later, and like a dark cloud the eagles were upon them!

At short range, and in a blind fashion, for they could hardly see, both Ben and Harley discharged their heavy revolvers.

The bullets both took effect in one bird, only wounding him, however, but causing him to fly away again with screams of pain.

The other bird flung his immense wings about Ben Bradley's form, and tried to pull him from the cage.

He succeeded in lifting Ben to the rail of the car.

Then the lad succeeded in bringing his revolver into use.

With great difficulty, smothered and blinded as he was by those massive wings, and hurt by the iron grasp of those huge claws, he managed to raise the hammer of his pistol.

It was all he could do to use his right arm, so firmly did the wings of the eagle pin his arms to his body, but with a great effort Ben brought the revolver up, pressed the muzzle against the bird, and fired.

The shot took effect, and the eagle let go his hold.

This dropped Ben Bradley fairly upon the rail of the car, and he was slipping over the side when the boy balloonist caught sight of him.

Harley caught Ben's leg with a firm grip of his left hand.

It was done just in time to prevent Ben from journeying down to the earth with more speed than enjoyment.

Giving a violent pull at the leg, Harley brought Ben down to the bottom of the car in safety.

"Thanks," said Ben. "That was a mighty close shave."

"Don't mention it," said Harley. "When we get to your gold mine and gather up— My God! we're falling!"

The startling announcement was made as the Sky Traveler began to slowly but very perceptibly descend.

"The eagles," cried Ben, who, in company with Harley and the Irishman was much startled.

"What about them?" demanded the young balloonist.

"Where are they?"

"They flew away."

"But they may be on top of the bag, sinking us by their weight."

Harley felt that Ben was correct in his conjecture.

"You're right," he cried. "That is why we are sinking. Great heavens, if those birds tear the bag with their claws and beaks, we shall be dashed upon the earth!"

"Then try to reach there in safety," said Ben. "Go down as lively as possible."

"Begorra, and that's sensible," put in the big Irishman. "Arrah, and be the smoke o' Kate Kelley's pipe (be the same token it was a rale black dudeen) it's not Dinny Malone that wants to be kilt by haythenish aygles, so I don't."

Harley at once shut off the current from his battery, thus cooling and at once contracting the gas within the bag, and they began to descend rapidly.

Harsh cries greeted this movement, and the alarmed eagles, who really were perched above,

at once deserted the top of the balloon, and returned to the attack, more enraged than ever.

But our friends were now ready for them, and met them with a prompt and rapid fire that was deadly and decisive.

Hit in vital parts by the bullets, the big eagles careened over, and began to fall toward the earth.

Harley at once restored the proper heat to the gas in the bag, and they began to rise again.

"Search above and below, Dennis," he said to Malone, "until you find a current that will carry us close to Golden Gulch. I want to see Ben's plucky sister, and also get a peep at the gold-bedded stream."

CHAPTER V.

CATCHING A TARTAR.

"SAY, Bill, what is that thing walking up the street?"

"Hal! ha! give it up, Jim."

"Oh, that's something that blew in with the wind."

"But it's alive."

"Oh yes; I guess it can talk, too."

"But you can't call it a man."

"Oh no, pard; that 'ere thing hain't no man; it's a piece o' machinery. When it runs down it'll stop."

"Hal! ha! ha!"

And a loud chorus of laughter greeted the last pleasantry.

There was cause for the mirth of the several speakers who formed part of a big crowd of miners who sat in front of the Diggers' Delight.

Along the street—the only street of Golden Gulch—came a figure that would have been all right on Broadway, New York, but certainly was remarkable in that rough mining-town, where a white shirt, a collar or cuff, or a plug hat had probably never been seen.

The stranger who had excited the mirth of the miners was a young man of twenty-five or thirty years, of medium height, fine form, and graceful movement. He was clothed in a delicate, cream-colored suit, with tight-fitting, bell-bottom pants, single-breasted coat, white tie, and white plug hat. His snowy shirt-front was adorned with a diamond stud, his hands were covered with cream colored gloves, he carried a slender cane, and he was constantly twisting his pretty brown mustache as he gracefully sauntered along the irregular street.

There probably wasn't such another foppishly-dressed man within five hundred miles of Golden Gulch, and it was not at all to be wondered at that the rough-and-ready miners greeted the appearance of this remarkable stranger with good-natured chaff and laughter.

The young man, however, took no notice of their derision.

He walked slowly and gracefully along, and was passing the Diggers' Delight, when one of the idlers called out:

"Say, sonny, where'd yer come from?"

The fop took no notice of the speaker, who was a great, broad-shouldered, hard-fisted fellow, known as Jack Slasher, the acknowledged "cock o' the walk" in Golden Gulch.

This seemed to anger Slasher, and with a snort of rage he yelled out:

"Say, you white-shirted skunk with the white tie, I'm talking to you."

Then the stranger stopped, turned about, drew forth an eye-glass, stuck it in his eye, and gravely regarded Slasher from head to foot.

The crowd roared at the odd manner of the fop, and Slasher felt vexed at the peculiar treatment. With an expression of contempt, he spat fairly upon the highly-polished right shoe of the stranger.

"There, you flyaway," he said, "that's my opinion of you!"

"Really, that's too bad," said the young fop, in a drawling manner, looking at his boot. "Was that an accident?"

"Why, of course," grinned Slasher. "I was spitting at a man's foot down in Yuba Dam."

The crowd roared.

The fop drew forth a snowy linen handkerchief from his pocket.

"As it was an accident," he said, in that mild manner of his, "of course you will wipe it off."

"Me wipe it off? Me, Jack Slasher, the bully of Golden Gulch?" cried the other, and then he suddenly added, with a wink at his comrades: "Why, of course I'll wipe it off. Boys, just see me wipe it off!"

He took the handkerchief from the hands of the stranger.

The crowd grinned broadly in high anticipation, for they knew that the bully meant

to "wipe" the stranger instead of the soiled boot.

With a grin that threatened to break into a laugh every second, Jack Slasher approached the fop, handkerchief in hand.

When close to him the bully drew back his hand, and made a quick, open-handed slap at the stranger, with the evident intention of knocking him over with the heavy stroke.

Everybody expected to see the dandy sprawl in the dust, but they were very much disappointed.

Up went the fop's hands with the speed of a rocket. One long arm blocked the sweeping slap, and the other, the fist tightly clinched, shot out with immense force, catching Slasher under the chin, raising him from his feet, and knocking him over two chairs and their startled occupants, before he fell with a crash upon the ground.

The spectators were struck dumb with astonishment.

That this foppish stranger who "blew in with the wind," should thwart and knock down Jack Slasher, the terror of the town, was a matter wonderful enough to deprive them of utterance for some seconds.

Then, when they saw the fop standing still in his tracks, with the same off-hand, easy expression on his face, their admiration overcame every other sentiment, and their cries of approval rung out:

"Hurrah for the swell!"

"Ain't he immense?"

"Bully for the banty!"

"He's a plucky one, he is."

"He's a cool card, that fellow is."

Jack Slasher, who was only a trifle bewildered by his fall, got upon his feet, drew a knife, and rushed furiously at his foe.

Like a flash, a small revolver appeared in the stranger's hand, looking very much as though it had slipped from his sleeve, and before the infuriated Slasher had taken three steps with the upraised knife in his hand, the young fop took a hasty aim and fired.

The miners gave a groan, for they all thought that the bullet had been aimed at Slasher, who, despite his fighting proclivities, was good-natured and well liked.

The next instant they burst into a hearty cheer!

With a cool nerve that would have done credit to one of the most noted marksmen in the land, the stranger had fired at the uplifted blade, and his bullet had knocked the bowie from Slasher's hand!

It was an act of cool bravery; just such a one as the miners could appreciate.

"He's a trump!"

"Give me your fist, little one."

"Plucky as a wild-cat."

And then they crowded around him with expressions of regard, fully a score of them pressing him to enter the Diggers' Delight and "try something," an invitation which was smilingly declined.

Jack Slasher's hand and arm had been quite paralyzed when the bullet struck the bowie, and he seemed dazed for a moment and unable to realize what had taken place.

When, however, he saw his friends trying to shake hands with the stranger, he felt that he had been disgraced in their eyes and his eyes.

He blazed up again with anger and made a rush at his quiet enemy.

"Let me at the sneak!" he roared. "Give a me a fair chance at the whelp, and I'll chaw him up!"

And he dashed furiously toward the little fop who had displayed so much grit. The miners did not think that the dandy ought to be bothered again, and some of them seized upon Slasher.

"Let the boy alone."

"Yes, Slasher, you've got no right to tackle him again."

"I'll show you!" roared Slasher, and he struggled furiously to break loose from his friends.

The calm, even tones of the stranger put an end to the struggle.

"Gentlemen," he said, "please don't hold him on my account. I can take care of myself."

There was so much confidence in the voice of the speaker that the miners let Slasher go.

But Slasher, although angry, began to feel some respect for his undersized enemy, and did not rush wildly upon him.

He gazed for a brief instant upon the fop, and the latter smilingly said:

"See here, Mr. Bully, you insulted me and I knocked you down. I am of the opinion that I

squared matters with you. If you are not satisfied, why just pile in and I'll give you all the satisfaction you want. I warn you, however, that I can whip two such men as you before breakfast."

The miners laughed, and some cheered the plucky stranger.

"Brag's a good dog, but braggin' won't down me," said Slasher, and went at his foe in a sledge-hammer style, striking terrific blows with right and left hand.

But his sledge-hammer blows were neatly blocked by the long, sinewy arms of the young stranger, and a straight hit on the neck knocked Jack Slasher down again.

"Rah!" yelled the crowd.

Up jumped Slasher and made for his foe again, and once more a clever right-hander sent him flat on his back, this time with a damaged nose, from which the blood flowed.

Twice more the hard headed bully toed the mark, and twice more he was neatly knocked down again by the long-armed, foppish stranger, who was smiling confidently and still twisting his brown mustache.

Then Jack Slasher got up again, cast one glance at his smiling, confident opponent, and sadly said:

"I cave!"

After which he walked off for repairs.

"Rah!" yelled the miners again, and almost carried the victor into the bar-room of the Diggers' Delight.

The highly-amused crowd ordered whisky by the quart, and began to indulge in the biggest kind of celebration.

"What's your handle, pard?" demanded a score of voices.

"Harry Brown," said the stranger; "and as you're all so friendly, let me begin our acquaintance in proper style. Gents, all have something with me."

And he threw down a twenty-dollar gold-piece on the bar.

With another cheer for Harry Brown the crowd began ordering their drinks; and meanwhile the victorious stranger, who had accomplished such wonders with muscle, science and nerve, glanced about him.

He saw the landlord of the place at one end of the bar keenly overlooking his business.

Harry Brown walked up to him.

"Landlord, can I have a private word in your ear?"

"Stranger," said the delighted owner of the saloon, "any man that can do what you have done can have anything I've got and not pay a cent."

Brown smiled.

"Thank you," he said; "I can pay for all I get. I wanted to ask you if there was a family named Bradley living in the town?"

"You mean the Bradley children, as most folks call 'em. The father and mother got their hair lifted by red-skins, about three years ago."

"I guess they're the folks."

"Well, the boy and the gal lived right down the street just a few hours ago, but the boy—Ben—narrowly escaped hanging this very morning."

"What?"

"Sartin sure; stole a bag of money. Let me tell you the yarn."

And the landlord of the Diggers' Delight told him the story of the morning, winding up with a glowing description of the double rescue, first by Annie Bradley and then by the Sky Traveler.

Harry Brown listened attentively, and thanked the landlord. Then, without asking any more questions, he requested a private room, and asked that his supper be sent there.

"Anything, everything in the house for you," said the landlord, and he had the hero of the hour shown to the best room in the house.

There, within an hour, a very good supper was sent to him; and Harry Brown had succeeded in putting away an excellent meal, when a knock sounded upon the door of the room.

"Come in!" Brown called out.

"Beg pardon," said a voice at the open door, and as Brown looked up he saw the damaged countenance of his late antagonist. "I thought this was somebody else's room."

"Never mind," cheerily responded Brown.

"Come in and have a drink."

And jumping up, he held out his hand to the man he had defeated.

With an odd expression on his face, the big fellow grasped Brown's hand, and in a doubting way said:

"No hard feelings, pard?"

"Not a bit," cordially, and taking up a flask of whisky, the young man gave it to Slasher, saying: "Drink to our better acquaintance."

"Well, you are a screamer!" declared Slasher, and took a deep draught.

"Here's hoping we'll be good friends in the future!" and Brown also took a drink from the flask.

"Pard," said Slasher, "you're the bulliest man I ever met. You licked me, fair and square, and now you shake paws and ask me to liquor with yer. I say you're a screamer, and I'll fight for yer any time."

"And I think that you're a good-hearted, powerful chap, with lots of strength and a quick temper; but my opinion of you is that you're a square man," said Harry Brown.

"Pard, you tickle my heart—yes, sir. I'm a friend to you, through thick or thin—and don't let anybody forgit it. Roll up yer sleeve, pard, and give me yer bare arm."

Wonderingly, Harry Brown rolled up his shirt-sleeve, and exposed a white arm that was knotted and corded with immense muscles.

"Do yer happen to notice how black my peepers are?" asked Slasher.

"Yes; I notice that your eyes are quite as black as Spanish or Italian eyes generally are."

"Pard, you're right. I've got Spanish blood in my veins, and I reckon that makes me kinder hasty. But look."

He took Harry Brown's arm in his left hand, drew a knife with his right and made a small cut in the white flesh.

The blood instantly started forth from the slight wound.

Bending down, Jack Slasher placed his lips to the cut and drank the red life-current.

Harry Brown watched the act with considerable curiosity.

"There," said Jack, "that settles it. Now I've your blood in my veins, and among the Spanish people they say that when one turns ag'in his blood it turns to fire in his veins. So, pard, if I was to betray yer, or go back on yer in any way, the blood I drank would turn to fire and drive me mad. Take me for a pard, and trust me, I'll die for ye!"

Feeling that he had gained a valuable and powerful friend in this Hercules of the mining-camp, Harry Brown very readily accepted the offer.

"Slasher," he said, "I take you for a pard; and as I've a purpose in coming to Golden Gulch, and a dangerous one, too, you may have many chances of proving your faithfulness."

"I'll be there, pard, every time. But tell me your name and what brings yer to Golden Gulch."

"I am Harry Brown, a detective; I've come here to establish the Bradley children in their rights, and to hunt down, secure and bring to justice the murderer of their father and mother."

CHAPTER VI.

THE STREAM OF GOLD.

Owing to contrary currents, Harley Willis was unable to reach the vicinity of Golden Gulch before dark.

Then he allowed the balloon to come down in a little valley, where he was completely shut in.

Here they anchored and passed the night, awaking with the first peep of dawn.

"By Jove, we're only a short distance from my bonanza," answered Ben, when he gazed around him. "Do you see those little rocky ridges running to the east, about half a mile away?"

"Yes," responded the balloonist.

"Well, between those ridges of rock you will find the gold-bedded stream!"

After an ample breakfast the young aeronauts released the Sky Traveler, and away they gracefully moved to the cliffs.

By dexterous management, and, also, by favor of a light current moving in the required direction, Harley was enabled to hover fairly between the walls of the canyon, and then dropped slowly down until the car of the big balloon rested on the south bank of the stream.

The drag-rope was made fast, and out they leaped.

With all the eager interest and excitement that gold can produce, Harley Willis ran to the stream, plunged his hand into the clear depths, and scooped up a handful of the dull, red particles that formed its bed.

Examining the pieces with the eye of an expert, he drew a long breath and grew red and white by turns.

"Well?" demanded Ben.

Harley uttered a cry of delight.

"Gold?" asked Ben.

"Why it's perfectly pure," cried the young balloonist, trembling with excitement as he drew up handful after handful of the little red lumps. "I suppose these particles have been washing down into this stream from high lands for hundreds of years, until the water flows over a complete bed of pure gold. Dennis!"

"Be Heavens, I'm here, and purty near as cracked as yerself," said Malone, whose eyes were bulging.

"We can take away enough of this gold in the car of the Sky Traveler to make us all wealthy for life."

"Arrah, and is that threue?"

"True as gospel."

"Be Heavens, thin, and it's meself that'll have me hair dyed," triumphantly cried Malone. "I'll go back to the county Tyrone, and buy an ilegant farm wid pigs and everything, and when me hair is black, be Heavens, I'll coort the purtiest girell in the land. Hoorool Dinnis Malone, Esquire, wid black hair."

And the delighted Irishman danced a reel on the golden shore, until his shock of fiery-red hair was tumbled about his good-natured face.

"Well, we'll not take our load of the stuff now," said Harley, beginning to recover a little from his first wild transport of joy. "We must see about Ben's sister, first. We can always come here and get our gold. Nobody is likely to run away with it. No loads could be carried up those walls."

And he looked confidently up the steep face of the rock.

Here and there were footholds—at long intervals there were also ledges or natural shelves, and an occasional sprinkling of hardy mountain bushes that sprouted forth from crevices. None but hardy and fearless climbers would attempt such an ascent.

"By the way," said Harley, regarding the rock attentively, "how did you find your way here to this stream?"

"By climbing. I have been up and down that wall of rock perhaps half a dozen times."

"If you can scale it, I'm sure that I can," cried the adventurous young voyager, and with a light spring he leaped up, clutched a stout bush with one hand, and began the somewhat perilous ascent.

"I'll go with you, and show you the different places I made use of," said Ben Bradley, and up the face of the rock he also sprang.

With painful toiling they made their way up foot by foot for about twenty yards, and then came to rest where a broad shelf of rock jutted out fully four feet from the wall.

On this ledge rested a stone weighing hundreds of pounds, looking as though it had been placed there by the hands of giants.

"Why, look, Ben," excitedly exclaimed Harley Willis, peering around this immense rock, "this big stone covers up a hole in the wall. In fact it is just like a locked door, opening into a passage through the cliff."

"Right," cried Ben, narrowly examining the back of the big stone. "There is a passage behind this stone, leading right into the rock. And perhaps a mine of gold inside."

The two lads looked excitedly at one another.

Harley placed his hand upon the big stone, exerted all his strength, and made it rock.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "The stone is merely balanced, and together we can hurl it from the shelf."

"Then let's do it," said Ben, "and we can explore the interior."

"Denny!" roared Harley.

"Yes."

"We're going to throw this big stone down upon the bank. See that you stand clear."

"All right!"

"And go to the car and bring me one of my torches," ordered Harley.

"I will."

"Now," said Harley, bracing himself as best he could. "Plant your feet in a solid manner, Ben."

"I'm all right," returned Ben, who got a firm hold on a tough bush that grew near at hand.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

"Down with it!"

Together the two boys applied the united strength of their arms and legs, and with a reluctant spring sound the massive stone tumbled from its resting-place, boomed through the air, and imbedded itself deeply in the yielding bank of the stream.

A dark, tunnel-like opening was exposed to view.

"Lively with the torch, Denny," yelled out the owner of the Sky Traveler. "Tie it to a light line, and sling it up."

"Be aisy," said Denny, and tied an odd-looking contrivance on the end of a light strong line.

This peculiar-looking machine he whirled around in the air a score of times, and then hurled it upward with all the strength of his massive right arm.

With a true aim it was cast above the boys' heads, and Harley caught it with a dexterous twist of his hand.

"What do you call it?" asked Ben, looking curiously at the odd-shaped affair, which was about three feet long, and looked like a thick metal rod with a steam gage at the bottom, and a large bull's-eye lantern at the top.

"I call it a magnesium torch," replied the young scientist. "It is my own invention, and works to perfection. This round part at the bottom contains the coils of magnesium wire and the clock-work machinery that feeds the wire through the pipe to the lamp. The lamp itself is an ordinary oil lantern of the bull's-eye pattern, with a contrivance for feeding the wire to the flame. The torch will burn for over two hours, and gives a light powerful enough to almost blind a person at the distance of two or three hundred feet."

"That's great," said Ben. "Set the thing going."

Harley set light to the wick of the oil-lamp, and when it burned up clear he started the machinery at the bottom of the invention.

With a buzzing sound the wire began to feed to the flame of the lamp, and a blinding glare issued from the bull's-eye.

Harley closed the door of the lantern, and the powerful light was intensified when it streamed forth from the lens.

"That's grand," said Ben. "Now to explore the interior of the rock."

They were about to enter, when, luckily as it afterward proved, Harley called out to the Irishman and told him to bring the balloon up to the opening and wait there for them to come back.

"And why?" asked Ben Bradley.

"Because I prefer it to the slow job of going down the cliff the way we came up," said Harley. "Come on."

They walked into the tunnel, took half a dozen steps, and suddenly found themselves in a large, vaulted cavern.

Overhead the gleaming stalactites flashed back the light of the torch in a thousand brilliant colors.

"Diamonds," shouted Ben.

"Where?" asked the balloonist.

"Why, look at them," said Ben, pointing to the vaulted roof.

Harley laughed.

"There are no diamonds there, Ben," he said. "Those thousands of glittering points you see are nothing more than a compound of carbonate of lime."

"And of no value?"

"Not to speak of."

"I thought they were all diamonds," said Ben, regretfully.

"Hush!" said Harley, and he held up his hand to enjoin silence.

Ben Bradley listened intently, but could hear no sound.

"I hear nothing," he said.

"I thought I heard the muffled sound of voices."

"From what direction?"

"I can't say, but I feel quite positive that my ears did not deceive me."

"Then we'd better move cautiously," said Ben. "Let us listen again for a minute."

They listened for a full minute, during which time nothing reached their ears but the hum of the clock-work machinery of the torch.

"Come on," said Harley. "I guess it was only imagination, after all. Oh, see, Ben, there are two passages yonder."

The cavern was fully fifty feet in length, and perhaps two-thirds as wide. At the extreme end appeared two wide-mouthed openings leading on to unknown parts of the interior.

"Which shall we take?" asked Harley.

"It's a blind choice," said Ben, "but let us take the one to the right. After that is explored we can take a trip through the others, and—"

He did not conclude the sentence, for it received a startling interruption.

A shrill cry, the shriek of a female in terror and distress, reached their ears, striking from

side to side of the tunnel, and losing some of its volume by the distance, but none of its accent of fear.

"A woman in peril!" shouted Ben.

"To the rescue!" yelled Harley.

One glance the brave lads bestowed upon their weapons, and then, side by side, dashed forward through the right hand tunnel to the rescue of her who had uttered the piercing cry!

CHAPTER VII.

THE MIDNIGHT VISIT.

WHEN Annie Bradley returned to Golden Gulch after defeating Dick Crowell and his man Johnson, she made no complaint to anybody about the affair because she knew that Dick would get out of the difficulty by some means, and perhaps injure her in the eyes of the rough and ready miners.

She was very self-reliant, too, this pretty girl who could hurl a knife and shoot a revolver in so deadly a fashion, and felt perfectly competent to take care of herself.

So with a prayer to God for the safety of her brother and herself, lonely Annie Bradley threw herself on her rude bed without removing her clothing, for she had an idea that Ben might return in the night and ask her to go away with him, and she wanted to be ready to start at once.

She had fallen into an uneasy slumber about the hour of midnight, when she was suddenly awakened by a light, timid tapping on the sole window of the cabin.

She jumped up at once, thinking of her brother.

"Who is it?" she said, coming close to the window and trying to see through the darkness of the night.

"It is I, Ben," answered a smothered voice from without, and she could dimly discern a form. "Speak low and move softly, Annie, or those men may hear you, and if they catch me again it is good-bye."

"Come to the door," whispered Annie in return, and then glided across the floor and removed the bar.

She opened the door, saying:

"Are we going to go away together, Ben, or are—"

"Oh, we'll go together, my darling," said the mocking voice of Dick Crowell, and the next minute the astonished girl was in his arms, her mouth covered with his hand. Annie was, of course, taken utterly by surprise, and unable to free herself from the rascal's grasp.

"At last," cried Crowell. "At last I have you safe and sound. Simpson!"

The man who had proclaimed the loss of a bag of money and had nearly effected the hanging of Ben Bradley, made his appearance.

"Get behind her, and tie her up tight as you like, hand and foot," said Crowell, who all the time held Annie close to his breast, offering the brave girl not the slightest chance to use her hands.

"All right," said Simpson, and with a rope he got behind the captive to obey his leader's commands.

Brave Annie Bradley, determined to struggle to the last, kicked out in a vicious and mule-like manner, and caught the unfortunate Simpson fairly in the pit of the stomach.

Of course the kick knocked all the wind out of the rascal, and he fell in a heap on the floor.

"You'll have no more chances to cut your capers," savagely said Crowell, and quickly gripping the girl by the throat he knocked her head forcibly against the side of the doorway.

One blow was enough to deprive poor Annie of sensibility, and she fell back limp and breathless in his arms.

"Simpson," said Crowell.

"I'll be all right in a minute," groaned the rascal. "That kick came mighty near to killing me, though."

Simpson finally got upon his feet and got to breathing correctly. Then he found the ropes and securely bound the insensible object of Dick Crowell's cruelty.

After which a gag was thrust into her mouth to prevent her making any outcry, and then the helpless girl was swiftly borne away from her home.

The unfortunate girl did not come back to sensibility until her captors had her safely under cover.

When Annie opened her eyes she was puzzled for some time to account for her whereabouts.

The gag had been removed from her mouth, and the bonds from her hands and feet. Annie sat up, and looked about her with interest.

She sat on a few old pelts at the side of a

rocky cave, a natural room big enough to turn a coach and team around in with ease.

About the cave, which was lit up by both lamps and torches, sat, reclined, or lay a dozen men, playing cards, smoking pipes, drinking whisky, and talking. The appearance of the men, their lawless conversation, their occupations at the time, and, above all, their surroundings, made the truth known to Annie.

She was in a den of outlaws!

For months past, pilfering large and small had been going on, and more than one miner had been robbed of his hard earnings by thieves who wore masks.

Annie did not doubt for a moment that she was in the den of these identical law-breakers.

One of the men saw her looking about, and jumping up, he at once brought her some food, which seemed clean and likewise well-cooked.

Annie was at first tempted to reject it, but she really felt hungry, and she also reasoned that she needed strength of both body and mind to attempt to escape, and she accepted the meal.

"Who are you, and where am I?" she said to the man who brought the dishes.

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies," bluntly said the fellow, and walked away.

And then this hearty heroine of Golden Gulch, with the kind of appetite that is gathered from exercise in the pure, open air, put away a meal that would have made a city girl open her eyes in wonder.

But, evidently, a drug had been put into the food, for within ten minutes after she had completed her meal, Annie felt an uncontrollable drowsiness steal over her, and asleep she went.

How long she slept she could not tell, but when she awoke she became aware of the fact that she had been removed since her repast, and now occupied another room.

This cave was smaller, and was nicely furnished with skins. On a pile of these soft furs the captive lay.

The light of a lamp that stood on a rude table was shed about the place. Annie looked around her, and saw Crowell near at hand, looking at her with a very satisfied grin.

Annie gave him a defiant look, and as her limbs were all free, she got upon her feet, and walked bravely up to him.

"Dick Crowell," she said, "what do you mean by this outrage?"

"What do you call it?"

"An outrage."

"They didn't call it by that name in olden times when a knight ran away with his lady love," grinned Crowell.

Annie Bradley regarded him with undisguised contempt and disgust.

"You brute," she exclaimed, "you heartless wretch, who could dash a girl's head against a door, let me go, before I blow your head to atoms."

She was unarmed when she began her tirade, but when she uttered the threat the aspect of affairs had changed.

Dick Crowell, as was common with men of his class, wore a belt about his waist, and this belt contained a brace of good-sized revolvers.

While speaking to him, Annie had suddenly bent forward, clutched the butt of one of the revolvers, and wrenched it from its resting-place.

In an instant the hammer was raised with the practiced motion of an expert, and the gleaming weapon was staring Dick right in the eye.

He was considerably startled, and fell back a step or two.

"Put that down!" he commanded in an authoritative manner.

Annie laughed at him.

"Do you think you are talking to some baby?" she said. "Put your hands up, you villain, or off goes the top of your head!"

The deadly tube was on a level with his forehead and the girl's bright eye looked just exactly as deadly as the pistol. Dick Crowell had already been treated to a satisfactory exhibition of the girl's skill with the revolver, and so he reluctantly put up his hands.

Annie cast a swift glance about her, and saw that there were five passages leading out from the rocky room, three before her, and two behind her. She decided to back into one of the passages at the rear.

"Stand perfectly still," she said, "or as sure as I'm a living girl I'll drill a hole through your skull. I've never yet missed my aim, and you may be sure that I'll not fail with your hateful face for a target."

Slowly she backed toward one of the rocky

passages, keeping her bright eye fixed on Crowell.

On his part Crowell seemed to watch her retreat with an expression on his face that seemed to indicate expectation of some sudden change.

And, sure enough, a sudden change did take place.

As Annie neared the rock passages her ears were saluted with a shrill hiss, and something twined about her neck with a slimy touch.

It was a snake!

Then this Western heroine proved that she was a girl. She screamed aloud in terror, and turned around to clutch at the serpent.

In an instant Dick Crowell leaped upon her, threw one arm about her, and then caught the snake, a small one of a harmless species, about the body.

He hurled the reptile away and then made a clutch at the pistol.

He wrenched it from her hand.

"Now, you troublesome cat," he snarled in a great rage, "I'll put an end to all this nonsense. I'll fool with you not one minute longer. You have defied me and laughed at me and now you shall be—"

At that instant a blinding glare of light was cast into his face, making his eyes useless, and filling him with surprise and alarm.

Then came a sound of quick footsteps on the hard stone floor, and a ringing voice cried:

"That's my sister!"

While another voice shouted out:

"Drop that lady, you infernal rascal, or I'll drop you!"

And into the rocky chamber rushed Ben Bradley and Harley Willis, the latter bearing his magnesium torch.

Not liking to see a pretty girl in the rude grasp of a vindictive looking fellow, the young aeronaut banged away at him as he spoke, and only a sudden twist on the part of Crowell saved his life.

He immediately dropped Annie, not liking to be shot at by a foe who was invisible, for so powerful was the glare of the magnesium torch that the lads behind it could not be seen, and turned to run out of the chamber by one of the opposite passages, when a number of his men, attracted by the shot, rushed in.

They, however, were likewise blinded by the brilliancy of the torch, but Crowell, who did not feel like losing his prisoner, yelled out:

"Fire at the light! fire at the light, and you may hit somebody."

This was good advice, and was dangerous in the extreme to our young friends. Not caring to serve as a target for the bullets of the ruffians, Harley Willis very prudently dropped the torch and jumped aside, giving Ben a dexterous twist that flattened him up against the wall of the passage.

The double movement was executed just in time. Half a dozen shots rang out, and half a dozen bullets whistled past the two lads.

But although they had escaped a probable danger by throwing down the light, they had also lost a great advantage by the same act, for, relieved from the blinding effect of the magnesium torch, the outlaws were now enabled to see their foes.

"Only boys!"

"Two lads!"

"Knock 'em down!"

"Yes; don't waste bullets on 'em!"

These and similar cries rang out, and then the rascals rushed forward with the evident intention of knocking over the enemies they deemed too youthful for pistol-work.

"Crack away," cried Harley.

"Never say die," said Ben.

"Oh, if I only had a revolver, or even a knife," groaned the female expert.

Ben and Harley banged away with their revolvers, wounding two of their foes, but before either of them could fire another shot they were borne to the rock floor by force of numbers.

Annie Bradley had turned to make her escape during this exciting scene with the idea of summoning assistance to the spot, but Dick Crowell sprung before her.

"No you don't, my beauty," he cried, and caught her in his arms. "You'll not leave this place till I'm done with you."

Holding the struggling girl fast in his arms, he turned his head in time to see the lads hurled to the ground.

"Don't waste any time on 'em," he shouted to his men. "I don't want any more prisoners. Knife the young fools."

The big brutes who were pressing down the forms of the struggling lads did not wait for a second order.

Their knives were raised to carry out the cruel command of the heartless leader when a clear voice rung like a bell through the cave:

"Hold, for your lives!"

And into the rocky chamber leaped the ponderous Jack Slasher, the one-time bully of Golden Gulch, with Harry Brown, the detective, at his side.

But the mere order might have failed to save the lives of the two boys, had not the newcomers been equally prompt with their weapons.

A bullet from Slasher caught one of the knifers in the back and tumbled him to the floor of the cave, while Brown, with his marvelous aim, broke the wrist of the other stabbler.

Then the detective leaped like a tiger toward Dick Crowell.

"Drop her, you fiend!" he shouted, and Crowell didn't have to be told to do it a second time.

He dropped Annie like a hot potato, and started for the passage from which Brown and Slasher had made their appearance, with the evident idea of getting away.

"After me," he yelled to his followers, "back to the big room. We'll get help, and clean these fellows out."

Away they all rushed, just as Harley and Ben got upon their feet.

"After 'em!" shouted Ben, and would have pursued the retreating rascals had not Brown caught him by the arm.

"Let them go," said the detective, "and let us try to get away from here before they return in force."

"Yes, let me get out of this terrible place," said Annie, throwing her arms lovingly about her brother. "Thank God, Ben, we're united once more."

"Follow me," spoke up Harley Willis, "and I'll take you to safety before those ruffians can return."

"Do it," said Brown, "and at some future time, with more men, we can clean out this den of thieves."

Harley caught up his magnesium torch from the floor. It was still burning, and when turned in the right direction, lit up the return pathway with a brilliancy almost equal to daylight.

Through the passage they went, and found the balloon in charge of Malone at the end of it.

"All aboard," cried Harley, and the much astonished people behind him hastily got into the spacious car attached to the Sky Traveler.

"Cast off!" was the next order.

Malone unwound the drag-rope from the ledge of rock, and with a majestic leap the great airship shot up into the air, bearing aloft its half-dozen passengers with ease.

CHAPTER VIII.

DANGER ALOFT.

WHEN the balloon had gone up some hundreds of feet, it suddenly ceased to ascend, and shot along at great speed toward the west.

So fast did the Sky Traveler move, that more than one of the passengers in the car felt a strange sensation at their hearts.

"Are we not traveling at an unusual rate of speed, Harley?" said Ben.

"Yes, we are, but we can't help ourselves, just now. You see, we left our last stopping-place in a hurry, and did not have time to shape our course in a proper manner."

"Is there any danger in this?"

"Not much. The Sky Traveler is a staunch craft, and can weather rougher passages than this."

In and out among the clouds they went, now in the sunshine, now in the shadow, now catching glimpses of hill and plain and shining stream below, and now, again, surrounded by an almost inky darkness, and all the time whirling along at a rate that drove the blood back from every cheek.

"Can't we get out of this?" whispered Ben Bradley to Harley.

"No," was the whispered reply. "Without a bit of gas in the bag, this mighty current would keep us from falling to the earth. We can neither ascend nor descend until the force of this current is somewhat spent. But I don't think we are in danger."

"But we may be swept out over the ocean," said Ben.

"That is so," gravely returned Harley.

"How fast are we going?"

"It's impossible for me to say, but I think this current runs eighty miles an hour at least."

"Why," cried the astonished Ben, "forty

miles an hour on land will knock a man down and take his breath away."

"Yes, but we move with this wind," smiled Harley. "If we resisted it, we could not live five minutes."

"I see," said Ben. "So if this current holds us for a couple of hours, we'll be out over the ocean."

"Less than that. It will not take an hour from the start to bring us many miles out over the Pacific ocean."

Delighted with the grand nature of this air traveling, Annie Bradley leaned against the side of the car, and gazed upon the magic panorama beneath.

Harry Brown, the detective, was watching the girl with a strange expression on his resolute face, when a hand was placed on his arm.

He turned and smiled kindly upon Ben Bradley.

"Well, my boy?" he said, and his voice was as soft as a woman's.

"You saved my life," earnestly said the lad, "and I'm sure I'm very grateful to you and Jack Slasher. But I'm also a little—a little—"

"Inquisitive," smiled Brown.

"Yes," admitted Ben. "I would like to know how and why it was that you turned up in that cave just in time to help me and my sister."

"Well, my name is Harry Brown. I am a detective from New York, and I am here in search of the Bradley children!"

Ben regarded him with surprise.

"Well, you've found 'em," he said.

"I know it," was the quiet reply.

"And what do you want with us?"

"I want to find out from you the cause of your father's emigration from New York. I want to find out all you know about the murder of your parents also."

"Well," said Ben, "in regard to father's coming to California, I can only say that he was rich, and suddenly became poor. I was only thirteen when this happened, and of course father did not explain affairs to me. I only know that we came down from wealth to poverty, and that after battling against it in New York for about a year, he started for the mines. In regard to the murder, I'll tell you the story."

And then, in a graphic style, Ben repeated the story of the battle on the plains, as told by him in the second chapter of this tale.

"The scoundrel, the villain, the base, unnatural hound!" warmly cried Harry Brown, who seemed terribly excited by the story.

"And you distinctly saw the mark of the black cross on his bare arm?"

"Yes."

"I'll hunt him down, the dog!" gritted the detective through his teeth, displaying an unusual amount of feeling. "I'll grip his throat and make him confess his crimes, and then I'll cut his black heart from his body! Oh, that I had him here at this moment!"

His eyes blazed, his face flushed with passion, his powerful hands clinched in a transport of rage, and his teeth ground together.

Ben Bradley was astonished at this exhibition of intense feeling in one who only claimed to be a paid detective, sent from the North to ascertain certain facts and do certain things, and he couldn't help saying:

"What makes you feel so deep an interest in this matter?"

Brown seemed to recollect himself, and in an evasive manner answered:

"Oh, if I carry out this case to a successful end, I shall receive great praise from my superiors."

But Ben Bradley's suspicions had been aroused, and the answer was not enough to satisfy him. However, he did not question Brown further, but to himself the boy said:

"There is a mystery about this. That man has more interest in this matter than an ordinary detective would have. Well, I suppose I'll know his secret one of these days."

After a moment the detective turned to him, as calm and as collected as ever:

"How many are there of you?" he asked.

"Only the two of us: Annie and I are the only children."

"Oh, then there never was any more?"

"Yes, I had a brother, but he died when I was a baby," answered Ben.

A strange expression crossed the face of the detective as he said:

"Trust me, Ben, before I get through with this matter I'll clear up a good deal of mystery, punish a villain, and restore you and your sister to a decent station in life."

With immense velocity the Sky Traveler had

bowled along for the last hour, held in the grip of the air current.

For some ten minutes past they had been among dark clouds, and the blackness of night reigned about them.

"Where are we, captain?" asked Brown.

"I really don't know, because I cannot see any more than you can. I don't know whether we're above land or sea, but by my estimate of the force of this wind we should be over the ocean."

"Ah," cried Ben, "light at last!"

"Arrah, and w'u'd ye look at the elegant landscape below?" and Malone pointed down, where the ocean lay smiling in peace.

At that moment they got into a more mild stratum of air, and Harley Willis at once began operating with his apparatus, trying to find another current that would bear them back to land.

While the majority of them were laughing at Malone's "bull," a startling cry rung out from Annie's lips:

"Merciful God!" ejaculated the startled girl, pointing straight ahead with a trembling finger, "look at that!"

And when they followed the direction of Annie's forefinger, and saw a great, dark-colored, funnel-shaped cloud rising from the sea, they knew what it was even before the calm, even tones of Harry Brown said:

"That is a water-spout."

"And bearing right down upon us with terrible speed," said Ben Bradley. "Can't we escape it, Harley?"

"I don't think so. This current holds us with a terrible grip."

"That's a terrible thing to run afoul of," broke in Jack Slasher. "Pards, we're booked, I'm afraid."

"I don't think so," decided Harry Brown in his resolute manner. "All hands give me their attention."

They turned to this cool leader.

"Everybody take a rifle or a revolver, cock it, and fire exactly when you hear the word. We may break that spout at a sufficient distance to escape all injury. There are tons of water in that cloud, and if we fail we are doomed. Ready?"

"Ready!" came from all, and there they stood with cocked weapons in hand waiting for the leader of the hour to utter the word of command.

The gigantic water-spout, seemingly about twenty yards in diameter and reaching from sea to sky, was catching up the spray from the waves with an awful roaring sound as it whirled around and around with frightful speed, bearing down upon the course of the Sky Traveler.

It was a terrible situation!

Everybody in the car knew that if the mighty wonder of the air collided with the balloon, they would all be dashed to death in less than a minute. There was no earthly hope of escaping the fatal consequences of a collision.

Brave and calm they all stood with weapons in hand.

Cool as ever Harry Brown noted the approach and carefully calculated the distance.

Every shot must tell.

"Ain!" he said.

Every weapon was pointed toward the roaring whirlwind, their fingers pressing the triggers.

"Fire!"

CHAPTER IX.

A NOVEL BOAT.

SIMULTANEOUSLY the reports blended. Then ensued a single second of the most awful suspense.

The water-spout had not been more than one hundred feet distant from the balloon when the order was given by Brown to fire.

A mighty change took place.

The enormous whirlwind, with its masses of water, burst with a noise like the roar of ten cataracts, making the air shake with tremendous vibrations.

Great jets of water struck the Sky Traveler with immense force, deluging its occupants and sending the air-craft down toward the ocean as though pressed by the hand of a giant.

With great speed the balloon descended, and the half-drowned voyagers could do nothing to arrest its progress.

They were stunned and blinded, as well as nearly strangled by the jets of water that had knocked them all prostrate to the floor of the car.

Crushed down by the sudden change in the

air currents, the Sky Traveler bowled down toward the waves.

It really seemed as though the plucky occupants of the car had only escaped one threatened death-blow for a fatal plunge into the deep.

One by one they struggled to their feet, wet and bewildered, but still thankful for their escape from one danger even though threatened with another.

"Can't we stop?" gasped Brown.

"We'll all be in the big drink in less nor no time," said Jack Slasher. "Good folks, if ye kin pray, here's the time to put it in powerful!"

"I can do nothing," groaned Harley, "with this immense—"

At that moment, when within about a hundred feet of the waves, the balloon suddenly ceased to move.

The sudden stop was the same in effect as the quick application of a brake to a car—the voyagers were all thrown off their balance.

So violently was Annie upset that she flew toward the rail, and seemed about to topple over when Harley Willis clutched her.

The young balloonist succeeded by a violent jerk in drawing the girl back in safety, but he himself lost his balance and fell over the side.

For a brief instant he hovered there, and Ben Bradley and Harry Brown both made a clutch for him; but the distance was too great for them to reach, and they failed.

With an ineffectual attempt to clutch the rail of the car, Harley Willis fell, and as he found himself descending, he cried as loudly as possible:

"Malone, the box!"

Then he swiftly descended toward the sea, while Denny Malone, with one swift movement caught up a box that rested on the floor of the car and hurled it out after his young master.

Relieved from the weight of the youthful aeronaut and that of the box which the Irishman had thrown after him, the Sky Traveler gave an immense leap from its stationary position and went up high into the air.

Everybody in the car was again thrown down.

Up fully a thousand feet the balloon bore its occupants, and then Malone, on his hands and knees, began operating with the electric apparatus.

The balloon was got under control in less than two minutes, the volume of gas was decreased by the reduction of heat, and the airship began to descend.

In a minute or two thereafter, while the rest were wondering what had been the fate of Harley Willis, Malone found a very favorable and mild current that swept the balloon along about a quarter of a mile above the ocean.

"Now all hands kape a lookout for the young master," said Malone.

"Do you think he's alive?" asked Brown.

"He's as well and hearty as ye are yerself, sor," confidently said Denny. "Kape all yer eyes skinned, and be Heavens! ye'll be astonished whin ye see the wonderful gossoon, so ye will!"

And truly, could the voyagers have seen Harley Willis at that moment they would have been astonished.

When Harley fell from the car of the Sky Traveler, some thirty or thirty-five yards intervened between him and the surface of the water, and falling this distance through the air was nearly enough to deprive him of breath without speaking of the force with which he struck the water.

He descended into the ocean feet first, and went down many, many feet before the force of his long dive was all spent.

Then up he bounded like a rocket to the surface, where he gasped for breath and looked around him.

A most remarkable change had taken place in Harley's appearance. His jacket, which was a loose one, had swelled out to an enormous size, and made him look like a fat man.

The truth of the matter was the whole lining of the loose coat was an entire oil-skin sack, inside of which were several powders done up in paper, and when the powders became wet they instantly turned into gas and swelled the oil-skin cover up like a small balloon, the action of the gas at the same time closing the valves where the water had entered in, and making the support reliable.

Knowing that his life saving jacket would keep him afloat for at least twenty-four hours, Harley Willis floated at ease upon the water, regained his breath, and looked above.

Not a trace of the Sky Traveler could he see, and after looking long and very anxiously for his noble air-ship, he turned away with a sigh.

"Lord only knows where they have been blown to," he muttered, with a rather heavy heart. "I may never see that pretty girl again."

He was worrying a good deal more about the probability of not seeing Annie Bradley again, than he was for the possible loss of his balloon.

The fact was that he had been very much smitten with brave Annie, and on her part the girl had looked with encouragement on the dashing balloonist.

Floating at ease upon the surface of the sunlit waves, Harley Willis cast a keen glance on all sides, evidently seeking for something.

At length his glances rested on the object he thought to discover. It was the box thrown by Dennis from the balloon.

It floated lightly on the water about one thousand yards away, and turning over on his back Harley began to propel himself toward it.

He was very light with his inflated bag, and made good time over the rippling waters.

In about fifteen minutes he reached the box, grasped it, and took breath again while bobbing up and down.

Secured to one side of the box, which resembled an ordinary soap-box in its general appearance, was a small, but very strong and sharp-edged chisel of chilled steel, held in place by leather straps.

Unfastening the straps, Harley seized the chisel with a firm grip, and began prying the cover from the box.

In a few minutes the lid was pried off, and the contents of the box were partly exposed to view.

Harley Willis drew forth some sheets or slabs of cork, about an inch in thickness, the edges provided with tenon and mortise, so that they fitted snugly together.

Piece after piece of cork was drawn forth and fitted together, and when the last slab had been joined on, Harley had a cork boat about seven feet long and thirty inches wide.

Then from the box the brainy young inventor drew forth an oil-skin cover of great strength and elasticity, made specially for the purpose, and wh ch he drew completely over the boat, buttoning it on the inside.

At about the central parts covering the gunwales, there were two uprights made of gutta-percha, which would serve as row-locks.

The young genius then took from the box sections of ash-wood, which, when joined together by means of snap fastenings, at once became good oars, five feet long, with a spoon blade.

The oars were placed in the boat, and then the box was put in also, to serve as place of a seat.

The novel craft was dancing as lightly as a bubble upon the water when Harley placed his hands on the stern and leaped into it.

A more buoyant boat than this cannot be imagined.

Taking off his immense jacket and throwing it down, Harley took his seat upon the box.

Then he sat still for a moment, and said to himself:

"Where am I?"

He tried to estimate the distance from the gold-bedded stream to the coast, and then tried to calculate how far the Sky Traveler had gone before meeting with the gigantic and perilous water-spout.

Try as he would to locate himself, he could only come to the conclusion that he was some miles out at sea, but how far he could not tell.

He took one glance at the sun, and then shaped his course toward the east, pulling for the shore he could not see.

His powerful strokes sent the light craft along at race-horse speed, and almost lifted it from the waves.

Harley could see that it was not yet noon, according to the sun.

He pulled away for about an hour, and then, tired with his exertions, united to the trials of the the morning, lay down in the boat to sleep.

He slept for a couple of hours, and was very rudely awakened by being dumped into the water.

The sudden contact with the cool ocean had the effect of making him wide awake on the instant.

With the instinct of a swimmer, Harley took a stroke the instant he came to the surface, and then looked about him.

His boat had been run down and upset by a

large, elegant steam-yacht, which was even now puffing lazily away toward the northeast.

"Ahoy!" yelled Harley.

But they didn't hear him on board the vessel, and Harley made up his mind to go after them.

His boat, too light to be injured by the force of the collision, was floating on the water near at hand, and in a short time Harley had collected his seat and the oars, and was once more seated in his fleet craft.

Bending to his work with a will he chased the yacht with such good success that within ten minutes he had overhauled it, and was regarded with astonishment by a young man who stood at the stern of the vessel, who, apparently, was amazed at the great speed of Harley's boat.

"Ahoy!" yelled Harley, again.

"Ahoy," answered the young man, who was richly dressed in a fancy costume and wore eye-glasses.

"Throw me a rope."

"I will."

And then he yelled for one of his lazy crew, and a rope was thrown to Harley, who made his boat fast and clambered on board.

"Good-afternoon," said the young man with the eye-glasses. "I'm Captain Berton Dyer, and this is my yacht, the Corrigan, from San Francisco."

"Glad to meet you," said the aeronaut. "I'm Captain Harley Willis of the Sky Traveler."

"That's an odd name for a boat," rejoined Captain Dyer.

"It would be an odd name, indeed, for a boat," said Harley, "but it happens to be the name of a balloon."

"Oh, a balloon!"

"Exactly."

"And have you got one?"

"I had one a few hours ago, and fell out of it, leaving five friends behind me, including a most beautiful young lady."

"Oho! then it was your balloon that I saw."

"Ah, did you see it? When?" excitedly asked Harley.

"About half an hour ago, and then it was passing along about on our present course. Of course, it went out of sight in a few minutes."

"Then, Captain Dyer," earnestly said the young aeronaut, "I beg of you to take me with all speed to the coast on this present course. I shall probably find the balloon somewhere near the shore, and be united to my friends again. If you are not bound elsewhere I beg that you will do me this favor. What do you say, captain?"

"Why," said gallant Captain Dyer, "I'd do it if only for the sake of the pretty girl you left behind you."

Then he gave orders to put on a full head of steam, and away they went at a rate that proved the Corrigan fast.

"The distance is about thirty miles to the coast on this course," said Captain Dyer, "and within two hours from now I'll land you."

Merrily onward bowled the Corrigan, and Harley improved the time by accepting Captain Dyer's invitation to have a bite.

After a splendid dinner with the captain the sailing-master and one of the officers of the yacht, Harley came on deck again and had a genial talk with the young owner, who proved to be a warm-hearted, liberal young gentleman, with all the wealth he could spend, and nothing to do but amuse himself.

"We may be able to see something of the Sky Traveler," said Captain Dyer, picking up a long telescope and focusing for the shore. "By Jove!"

"Is it there?" cried Harley.

"Yes," said Dyer. "Just look fair over our port quarter and you'll see it on the beach."

"I'm so glad they have come out of the scrape all right," said Harley, and then he took the glass, pointed it in the direction named by Captain Dyer, and brought his eye into range.

A moment later he dropped the glass, an expression of dismay on his noble face.

"Haste, captain!" he said, "the balloon is there, but deserted! What can be the matter?"

CHAPTER X.

THE AZTECS.

UNDER the really competent handling of Dennis Malone, the Sky Traveler hovered over the ocean, making short trips to the north, south, east and west, searching for Harley Willis.

The air-ship was cleverly kept at about a quarter of a mile above the water, and all eyes eagerly scanned the surface of the ocean.

The telescope, too, was constantly in the hands of some one member of the little company in the car, and the ocean was swept under the powerful lens with no better result than had been achieved by the naked eye.

"Poor Harley," said Ben. "I wonder if he has been drowned?"

"It was a terrible fall," remarked Brown.

"And he may have flopped on his back and had the wind knocked clean out o' him, you know," put in Slasher.

"Be Heavens, an' ye're all wrong," averred Malone. "The gossoon axed me to throw the box, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Thin, be Heavens, he knew he was going, so he did, and it's not Masther Harley that wouldn't be landin' in the wather in proper sthyle. And thin, do ye moind, he can't sink."

And he told them all about the wonders of the oil-skin jacket, and the sectional boat in the box.

"We're off the coarse," said Malone, "and that's the trouble. It don't nade more nor a few minutes for a balloon to thavel a dozen miles away."

"Then you think that we may be many miles from the spot where he fell?"

The detective asked the question.

"Very loikey," said Deuny.

"Then we may hunt all day and not find him," said Brown. "Now we certainly were a number of miles out from land when we saw that water-spout. Harley was dropped at that point. It is probable, according to Malone, that the lad has now got a boat, and one remarkable for lightness and speed. I think the boy will make for the shore, guiding himself by the sun, and that is about the best thing we can do. We shall both strike the coast within some miles of one another, probably, and he certainly could see the Sky Traveler at anchor, and come to it."

The proposition seemed so sensible to all that they begged of Denny to follow it, so the brave Irishman, not without a regretful look at the ocean, sought a current to the east and bore away for the coast.

The balloon descended upon a broad strip of pebbly beach, back of which was a belt of woodland and a range of pretty hills.

The country looked as wild and natural as could be.

"Do you know what part of the coast this is, Denny?" asked Brown.

"Indade I do not," said Malone.

"I see no signs of life," remarked Annie. "This part of the country must be perfectly deserted."

"Yes, I'll wager there's not a house or a cabin within ten miles, at least," said Ben.

"It certainly looks wild," added Brown. "Guess I'll take a stroll in the woods."

Of course, six or seven people in the car of the balloon had made rather crowded quarters for all hands, and they were now averse to stretching their limbs.

They had nothing to do but wait for the possible arrival of Harley Willis, so they scattered about.

At first Annie Bradley walked along the beach, picking up some rare and pretty shells, but later on she strolled off to the cool-looking woods.

They had not seen a sign or trace of human beings since the Sky Traveler was made fast, therefore it was with a careless step that Annie entered the woods, and began searching for fruits and flowers.

At first she kept near the edge of the woods, but gradually penetrated deeper and deeper.

Then shadowy forms began to rise behind the unsuspecting girl, flitting from tree to tree, and from bush to bush, all the time keeping out of view.

So long as the girl wandered away from the coast, the hiding forms followed without molesting her, but the instant she turned to go back, they acted.

A score of savages closed in about her, and the astonished girl found herself in the center of a human ring.

She screamed lustily, drew her revolver with a swift motion, and without at all being particular in her aim, fired at one part of the ring.

A tall savage caught her wrist at the moment, and the bullet flew harmlessly away.

Then a number of hands grasped and held the girl.

She uttered shriek after shriek, with the sole view of attracting her friends to her rescue, and struggled furiously with her captors.

But what could even a robust and plucky girl do against twenty men? In a moment she was

hurled to the grass, her hands were tied to her body, her ankles lashed together, and then poor Annie was helpless.

Then one of her red captors placed her on his back, and the whole lot started off at a brisk pace.

While journeying on the back of the man who had shouldered her, Annie had time to think and compare matters.

At the first moment of her surprise she thought she had been attacked by some Digger Indians, natives of California, and the lowest, meanest wretches of their race.

Now that she had time to think over it, she recalled to mind that her foes were more olive than red, that they had both chins and foreheads that receded; that they bore themselves nobly, and very much different in mien to the degraded "Digger," and additionally, they wore gold and silver ornaments, and bore spears in their hands that were tipped with gold, and ornamented with jewels.

Reviewing all these facts in her mind, Annie Bradley soon made a guess at the identity of her captors.

She was in the power of a remnant of the once powerful Aztecs, once the rulers of Mexico, the worshipers of the pagan god Huitzilopochtli, to whom for centuries past they had been making human sacrifices.

Formerly they had occupied towns and cities in Mexico only, but since they had been conquered by the invaders of the land they had become scattered, and had sought some remote and wild corners, where they could live as their ancestors lived for centuries before them.

Annie knew that there were some few Aztecs in California, and heard strange stories concerning their wonderful temples, their gods, and their sacrifices.

Therefore, it is not to be wondered at that Annie Bradley, brave as she naturally was, felt a cold shiver run through her young bones when she thought of being sacrificed by her idolatrous captors.

"My brave brother and his friends will not desert me," she said to herself more than once, but for all that she felt chilled with horror, now that she was satisfied that her foes were, indeed, members of the Aztec race.

There were twenty-two members in the band that had captured Annie, and they were all fine-looking and intelligent in their way. One after another took turns in carrying the captive, and so the band was enabled to travel with considerable speed.

Fully five miles into the interior they penetrated, and at length reached their village, a group of twenty odd houses lying in a valley surrounded by a high range of hills.

When the band was seen approaching with a captive, the people, men and women, old and young, rushed out into the sole street of the town, and at their head came a man with a long robe.

This was a priest, and in the original language of the race he shouted:

"A sacrifice!"

The people took up the cry, appearing to go almost wild with joy.

A small body of soldiers came forth from a temple; they were well-drilled, splendidly dressed, bore shields and spears, and also short swords.

The captive's feet and hands were then released, and she was placed before the doors of the temple.

Barbarous instruments were played, and a procession was formed of the villagers, who passed slowly before Annie and made a low bow, uttering words which were unintelligible to the girl, and seeming to treat her with great respect.

Dishes of solid gold and silver were then placed before her, containing food that appeared good and well cooked.

The whole thing seemed like a dream to the girl, who could scarcely believe that she was awake.

But when she saw the long robed old priest draw a keen, glittering knife from beneath his dress and hold it aloft, she shuddered, for she felt that the knife was intended for her.

"My people," cried the priest, "once more shall the blood of a beautiful sacrifice purify the floor of the temple and make glad the heart of the mighty, gracious god, Huitzilopochtli."

"Prosperity will once more smile on us in this retreat, far from the land of the great Montezuma."

"Let all prepare for the hour of sacrifice, for it comes with the setting of the sun."

A number of women came forward at the conclusion of his remarks, took up the captive

in their arms and bore her away, followed by the trained and armed band of soldiers.

Annie saw that it was useless to attempt escape from such a crowd. She could only hope for rescue from her friends.

She was taken into a house by the women, her garments were stripped from her, and then she was clothed in robes of fine cloth, heavy with gold and thickly ornamented with jewels.

A sort of crown was then placed on her head, and she was seated outside the house where this had taken place, to be admired and complimented by the people.

The food was again placed before her, and as she really felt hungry, and had not yet lost all hope of rescue, the sensible girl partook of it, finding it very good.

So the afternoon passed away, Annie being worshiped and admired, women and men chanting, and girls performing a strange dance.

Then she was led back to the door of the temple and placed upon a sort of altar, richly ornamented, while half a dozen priests gathered about her and held her down with a strong grip.

Then the high priest, brandishing aloft the long knife of sacrifice, chanted a sort of dirge and enumerated the many virtues of the god Huitzilopochtli, to whom the sacrifice was made.

At the end of the chant a shout went up, and the bright blade was lifted above the girl captive's heart!

CHAPTER XI.

SEARCHING FOR ANNIE.

Of course the shot fired by Annie Bradley and her loud screams were heard by the scattered passengers of the balloon, who were all amusing themselves along shore or in the woods.

Harry Brown, who was in a remote part of the woods at the time, ran with all speed toward the balloon.

The others all ran toward the same spot for the reason that they were unable to tell from what quarter the alarming sounds came.

They met at the car of the Sky Traveler and all exclaimed:

"What's the matter?"

"Where did Annie go?" demanded Brown.

"To the woods," said Ben. "She uttered the screams, I'm sure."

He darted away for the woods, and they all put after him, leaving the balloon deserted upon the beach.

Spreading out, with weapons ready in hand, they scoured the woods for a considerable distance, but saw no signs of Annie.

They shouted the girl's name aloud, but received no response, and were about to return to the shore to see if Annie had returned there, when Jack Slasher saw a handsome spear half concealed in some long grass and picked it up.

"Stand still a minute," he said, with his eyes on the ground.

He studied the appearance o' the spot for a few minutes, and as he was quite a fair woodsman, he boldly made this statement:

"Right here the girl was captured by a lot of men."

"White men?" asked Ben.

"No, nor exactly red ones nuther," replied the ex-bully of Golden Gulch. "Accordin' to this here spear, she was captured by them 'ere fellers what lived in Mexico afore white men come along."

"Aztecs?" said Brown.

"Pard, you've hit it. They must have one o' their towns in this part of the country. I'm advisin' that we git back to the balloon, go up, and use the spy-glass to locate the town."

"But," said Ben, excitedly, "if you've got the skill to read all this by signs, can't you follow up the trail, and let us rescue Annie?"

"No use, boy," said Slasher. "Jest look at the trail. No less than twenty men, and they're not Digger Indians, nuther, an' don't yer forgit it. These here chaps kin fight. Besides, the gal's in no danger, now."

"How so?" demanded Brown.

"They either kill 'em at sunrise or sunset," replied Slasher.

"Oh, as sacrifices?"

"Correct."

"Then," said the detective, "Jack's advice is good. Come on."

Back they went to the shore, to find to their astonishment that a handsome steam-yacht lay a few hundred yards off-shore, and that a handsome cutter was approaching the beach, manned by a full crew, and bearing Harley Willis in the stern.

The boat grated on the sands, and out leaped the young balloonist and Captain Bermon Dyer.

In a few minutes Harley was told all that had happened, and made acquainted with Jack Slasher's idea.

"I'll tell very soon," said Harley, jumping into the car. "Let go the anchor, Malone."

Two minutes later he was high up in the air, and brought the Sky Traveler to an almost stationary position.

Within five minutes he was upon the solid earth again.

"Slasher is right," he announced, as Malone made the balloon fast. "She has been carried off by just such a band as Slasher mentions; they are carrying her upon their backs, securely bound. With my glass I made out their village, toward which they are traveling. I should judge that it is five miles away, and they are more than half-way home."

"How many in the band, do you say?" asked Captain Dyer.

"About twenty."

"And how many people are we to look for in the village?"

"The place looked very small to me; and I shouldn't look for a very large fighting force," said Harley.

"But much larger than your numbers can successfully tackle?"

"We must tackle them, though," said Harley. "I'd save that girl, or try to, if I had to do it alone."

"Your numbers would fail against the Aztec village," said Captain Dyer. "I know something of them. They have a trained body of soldiers. Suppose I lend you my blue jackets?"

"Will you?" cried all.

"You bet I will," said the gallant young captain. "I've got plenty of arms and ammunition on board the Corrigan, and I'll lead every volunteer in my crew to the rescue."

He turned to the boat's crew.

"Will you volunteer to rescue this pretty lass from the heathen?" he asked.

A cheer was the answer, and the men all tossed up their caps.

"Brave lads," cried Harley.

"I'll take the boat back to the Corrigan and get the rest of the crew," said Captain Dyer.

"We can also bring the arms and ammunition for all. I'll stand at the head of twenty-five brave and well-armed men. By the way, how will you go?"

"In the balloon, with Malone, my man."

"Then I'll bring you a small cannon, and a suit of armor I bought in France. The cannon will be loaded with small stuff that will scatter broadly. The armor you can wear, and fear neither sword, knife, or bullet if you have to attempt the rescue alone."

"Thanks!" said Harley. "I'll take both along with pleasure."

With two oarsmen back went Captain Dyer to the Corrigan. Every sailor on board responded to his call for volunteers, and the preparations went on actively.

In less than fifteen minutes from the time that the men volunteered, the expedition under the lead of Captain Dyer was on its way, accompanied by Ben Bradley, Harry Brown, and the former bully of Golden Gulch, while Harley and Malone, in the Sky Traveler, with the small cannon and the suit of armor along, were bearing away through thin air.

Crossing some rocky ridges the trail of the Aztecs was lost by the party under Captain Dyer, and they were forced to come to a halt and search for it.

It was not easy to find where the earth could not receive impressions.

"Don't lose time hunting for it," spoke up Jack Slasher. "We know about the way to go to the town, so what's the use of losing time as may be valuable?"

"That's so," said Brown. "Harley gave us our bearings. Let's move on; the girl may be in great danger."

"All right," said Captain Dyer, and on they went.

The result of this was that they passed by the little range of hills that shut in the town of the Aztecs, and went a trifle off to the north without seeing a sign of the settlement.

Fortunately, for it was now growing late, Harley Willis, aloft in the car of the Sky Traveler, caught sight of them and saw that they had missed the point they aimed to reach.

He managed to lower his balloon in advance of them, and waited for them to come up, when he told them of their error, much to their surprise.

The time thus lost brought them dangerously near to sunset, and Ben was in a fever of

anxiety lest they should be too late to rescue his sister.

Back went the command under the young yachtsman, and Harley, clad in his suit of armor, with the assistance of Malone, dragged the loaded cannon on its low wheels to a pass not more than five feet wide, which led in between two hills to the Aztec town.

The arrangement had been made that he was to enter the town at this point, aim his cannon if he saw a crowd, and fire it among the crowd.

When Harley opened attack at this end of the town in the manner mentioned, the party under Captain Dyer was to rush in from an opposite entrance and fall upon the astonished villagers.

Harley saw the crowd about the temple, saw the raised altar upon which he believed Annie lay, and saw a long-robed Aztec standing over the altar, around which stood half a dozen more long-robed men.

Carefully training his cannon upon the idolatrous crowd and aiming low, the young aeronaut fired the piece.

With a loud roar it went off, and the hail of lead and iron with which it was loaded swept among the Aztecs, just as the priest raised the glittering knife above Annie's prostrate form.

In an instant the scene changed.

The cannon, aimed so as to be on a range with the lower limbs of the villagers, cut them down as a scythe mows down the tall grass.

The high priest's arm fell by his side, and an expression of terror crept over his stern features.

The priests who were holding on to Annie let go of her with a dismal howl, and fled with precipitate haste into the sacred temple, probably with the idea that they would be safe within its walls.

The wounded fell in a shrieking mass to the street, while the others stood bewildered and unable to turn one way or another.

And at that moment of extreme confusion, with Captain Dyer, Ben Bradley, Harry Brown, and Jack Slasher at their head, the sailors from the Corrigan made their charge.

CHAPTER XII.

IN ARMOR.

WITH a cheer as loud as the report of the cannon that had served as a signal, the hardy blue-jackets charged into the town at a double-quick pace.

The common people fled, but the trained soldiers of the Aztecs turned to meet them with a bold front.

In a moment they met with a crash, and then it was cutlass against sword and revolver against spear and shield.

Clad from head to foot in armor that set snugly on his athletic form, and with a revolver in each hand, Harley Willis made a dash for the temple.

He was just in time.

The high priest had recovered from his terror, and was about to retreat into the temple.

It seems that he had made up his mind to carry out the sacrifice at all odds, for he raised the blade once more just as Annie, hearing the shouts and seeing that her friends were at hand, tried to get up from the altar.

The priest pushed her rudely back, and was about to stab her with the long, sacrificial blade, when Harley Willis drew a bead on him.

The aim was a hasty one but it was true, and with a bullet through his left lung the pagan priest fell.

Up the slope to the temple dashed the young balloonist, crying:

"Annie—Annie, it is I!"

Annie's eyes opened wide with wonder, as she leaped down from the altar and beheld this figure clad in armor rushing up to her, but she recognized the voice with a feeling of joy.

"Oh, Harley! is it you?" she cried.

And then, as though she had known him for years, she rushed into his arms, armor and all.

Throwing one arm around her, Harley led her away from the spot to the pass by which he had entered, and told her to run along it until she met Malone with the balloon.

Then he returned to the vicinity of the temple and dashed into the thickest of the fight, laughing to himself when blows were rained upon him, and turned aside by the solid armor.

He caught a cutlass from the hands of a fallen sailor, and slashed about him right and left like a hero, not attempting to defend himself in the least, so secure did he feel in his dress of steel.

Jack Slasher fought with all the vim and relish of a man who loves fighting as well as he loves eating, and disdaining either revolver or knife, used a big club with terrible effect, striking terrific blows with his long, powerful arms.

Ben Bradley was doing his share, and had already tumbled over two of his foes, when, in trying to evade a thrust of a spear, he fell.

Instantly the Aztec who had thrust at him was upon the boy, and once again the deadly spear was raised aloft, to be sunk into brave Ben's heart.

But Harry Brown, whose eyes seemed to be all over, and whose aim was sure, sent a bullet crashing through the barbarian's brain, just as Captain Dyer made a brave but unnecessary dash to the rescue.

The Aztecs certainly were good soldiers, and fought along with the cool and determined courage of trained troops.

But they could not hold out against the superior arms of the attacking party, and were soon forced to succumb.

A peculiar order rung out from one who appeared to be the leader, and they made a united dash for the temple in which the priests had taken refuge.

So sudden was the movement made, and with such unity of action, that they were half-way to the edifice before the astonished Americans had time to understand the dodge.

"After them," yelled Captain Dyer, and led the attack.

The entire body of men dashed after him with a cheer following the flash of his sword, but they were too late to cut off the retreat of the flying troops.

The last man got into the temple, and the door, constructed of iron, and fitted into solid stone, was closed.

Then as the Americans halted they saw that the temple was solidly constructed of stone.

"They're solidly fixed in there," said Captain Dyer. "Boys, I guess we'll have to let the rascals alone, for the simple reason that we can't get at them."

"So it seems," said Brown. "We can't batter down that door, and the building looks like a big lump of stone, the way they've built it."

Jack Slasher stood by and looked at the temple with longing eyes.

"It's a 'tarnal shame," he declared.

"What is?" asked Brown.

"That we can't git in."

"Oh, it doesn't really matter," said the detective. "We've rescued the girl and punished her abductors."

"Pard, yer talkin', but yer not on the tack I am. Yer see, pard, I knows something about them 'ere Aztecs—seen 'em in Mexico more'n a hundred times, an' I kin bet you as how there's lots o' plunder to be skinned out o' them temples."

"Plunder?"

"Yes."

"What kind?"

"Why gold and silver gods, some of the critters with diamond eyes big enough to make yer head swim."

"Is that so?"

"True as preachin'. Why, pard, you'd find a fortune in that temple, or call me a Digger, by Jingo."

"We can't leave all this treasure behind us, Captain Dyer," said Brown. "We are the victors, and to us belong the spoils. Your men will not object to a share of the prize money."

"That's true," Dyer exclaimed.

"But how are we to get in?" said Ben Bradley. "We might stay here and starve the priests out, but that would be a mighty long job."

"This temple is built as a place of retreat and refuge in time of danger," spoke up Harley Willis, "and the work has been solidly done, but if you will all wait here until I can go to the balloon and return, I think I shall be able to open that iron door for you."

"Go it," said Captain Dyer. "We'll stand guard until you return."

Away went the scientific lad toward the Sky Traveler, and then Captain Dyer improved the chance to look after his men, some of whom had fallen in the rattling fight.

He found one of his men killed, pierced through the heart by the long spear of an Aztec warrior.

Six more were wounded, two of them quite seriously, while the other four were wounded in a manner that was painful, yet not sufficiently bad to prevent them from fighting.

Half a dozen Aztecs, pierced by the bullets of

the attacking party, lay dead upon the ground, while nearly double that number had been wounded, and were now crawling away to a place of safety.

In a short time Harley Willis, divested of his armor, returned to the spot, and brought the small cannon with him.

Behind him came Annie Bradley, carrying a couple of packages.

With great care Annie placed the parcels on the ground, and then shook hands with her friends and kissed her brother Ben.

Then all hands watched Harley with considerable curiosity.

The young genius opened one of the packages, and brought forth a can of powder. He took the tissue paper surrounding the can, and looked about him.

"Who can make a slow fuse?" he asked, and one of the sailors touched his hat and stepped forward.

"I can make a time fuse," he said, confidently. "How long does your honor want it to burn?"

"Three minutes, at least."

"All right, sir."

He took the paper and some powder, and began manufacturing the fuse Harley needed.

Then the young genius took the bulk of the powder and carefully loaded the cannon, placing three or four large stones on top of the powder to serve the place of a ball.

Then he opened the other package and exposed something that looked like a can of canned fruit.

"What is it?" asked Brown.

"Oh, a trifling thing," smiled Harley. "I hold here a powder great enough to blow us all to eternity."

"Nitro-glycerine?"

"Yes."

They all began to move off, while the young balloonist laughed heartily at their uneasiness.

"Don't fear," he said. "I'm in no hurry to die. I'll be careful."

The can was placed against the door of the temple and the mouth of the cannon directed against it at a distance of two feet.

"Now, my man, how about the fuse?" said Harley to the sailor.

"Done, your honor," answered the sailor, giving it a last twist. "I'll warrant it burns no less than three minutes."

"That will give me all the time I want," said Harley. "My friends, I advise you all to take a walk. I can assure you that it will be for the benefit of your health to do so."

They didn't need a second request but got away at a lively pace; nor did they pause until they had put a safe distance between themselves and the dreaded explosive.

Very quietly Harley completed all his arrangements.

He kept talking in a loud tone all the time, in order that the imprisoned folks within the temple might not think the spot was deserted and come forth.

The long fuse was securely attached to the cannon, the end was set light to, and then Harley started away from the dangerous locality on a very lively run.

He reached the safe location where his friends had taken up their stand, and then all with eager interest awaited the result of the experiment.

With a uniform action the fuse burned down to the cannon.

The heavily-loaded cannon went off within three minutes after Harley reached his friends, but its report was drowned in the mighty roar that seemed to shake heaven and earth.

A cloud of dust, a shower of stones, and a series of startled cries followed, but for a few minutes our friends were unable to see the result of the tremendous explosion.

Then the smoke and dust cleared away and they saw that half of the massive temple had been shattered to fragments, while the other half was demolished in a degree that told how far-reaching had been the effects of the nitro-glycerine.

Not a soul was to be seen.

"Come on!" said Harley. "The temple is ours!"

With a cheer they dashed down upon the ruined temple.

Four dead men within the ruins was all that could be seen of the many who had taken refuge there. The rest had disappeared from view.

"Where are they all?" asked Captain Dyer.

"Blown to the four winds, as such inhuman brutes deserved to be," said Harley. "Had they been like other members of the human

family I could not have done it, but heartless brutes who could make a sacrifice of a beautiful girl—oh, I could blow them all into eternity and laugh at it."

"Yes, they are no more than the brutes of the field," said Harry Brown.

A shout from Jack Slasher at this moment attracted attention.

The former bully of Golden Gulch had picked up an overthrown image, and was holding it aloft.

It was about the size of a ten-pound baby, and had diamond eyes that gave forth a bewildering light.

"There's a prize," cried Captain Dyer.

"Hurrah!" yelled the crew of the Corrigan, and up went their hats.

"What's that worth?" asked Ben, turning to Harry Brown.

"On a rough estimate," said the detective, taking the image in his hands, "I should say that it was worth at least fifty thousand dollars."

"Hurrah!" again yelled the crew.

Then a half-dozen made a dive among the debris of the ruined temple. Several more images of bronze, brass, and iron were found, some of them gilded in parts exposed, and all supplied with eyes of diamonds.

At length the patron god of the Aztecs, Huitzilopochtli, was found. He had a broad face, wide mouth, and terrible eyes. He was covered with gold, pearls, and precious stones, and was girt about with golden serpents. On his neck were the faces of men wrought in silver, and their hearts in gold.

Everything in gold, silver, or precious stones was hacked off or pried out by the looting party, and an immense heap was made outside the ruined temple.

Then Captain Dyer, Harry Brown, and the young balloonist were elected to act as a committee for dividing the spoils of war, and so fairly was the division made that everybody was satisfied, and it was estimated that the sale of the stuff under fair circumstances would make all hands the possessor of quite a snug little fortune.

Then, with many handshakings, and hopes to meet again, Captain Dyer bade adieu to Harley Willis and his party, and with his wounded borne on litters, marched off at the head of his victorious crew, while Harley and his friends, bearing their share of the booty, regained the Sky Traveler.

The prizes were safely stowed away in the bottom of the car, the reunited party got aboard, the drag-rope was cast off, the gas inflated by heat, and up into the thin air they arose.

"Once more afloat," said Harley, with an admiring glance at Annie Bradley, who looked very charming in the costume the Aztec women had put upon her. "And now, the question of the moment is: where do you want to go?"

"Back to Golden Gulch," spoke up Ben, in his resolute manner. "With what we all know I can expose Dick Crowell and Simpson. I'll show up their guilt, even if I don't prove my own innocence. I am determined to go back there with my head erect, and if they plot against me again I can do what I've done before: fight for life and honor!"

CHAPTER XIII.

AN ARREST.

LATE the next day after the fight of the Americans with the Aztecs quite an exciting scene took place in Golden Gulch.

Finding, by careful inquiry, that no news of his villainy had been spread about the town, Dick Crowell unhesitatingly left his haunt.

He and a number of his men were seated in the Diggers' Delight, in company with a miscellaneous crowd of miners, tradespeople, prospectors and others, when the thunder of many hoofs was heard, and a body of mounted men dashed up to the door.

They dismounted and passed into the bar-room just as the occupants sprung to their feet to see what was afoot.

A score of people recognized Sheriff Hays, and a number shouted:

"What's up, Jack?"

The eagle eye of the little sheriff ranged over the room, and he advanced upon Crowell.

"Dick Crowell," he said, "I want you. I arrest you as an outlaw, a robber, and the leader of robbers. Cave in, or you'll never see—"

But what he was never going to see remained a mystery, for at that very instant Crowell acted upon the defensive with lightning-like rapidity.

A revolver gleamed in the hand of the little sheriff, and it was known that no man in the mines looked more truly over the barrel of a weapon than did Jack Hays, so Crowell, who was really a shrewd fellow, was not foolish enough to invite a shot from the sheriff by drawing a weapon.

No, he waited until the sheriff was close to him, and then made a swift, hard kick at him.

He came at him in the stomach, and little Jack Hays doubled up like a ball and fell to the floor.

Then, with a signal-cry to his men, the leader of the outlaw gang bounded like a flash through an open window and disappeared from view.

"After him!" cried one.

"Stop him!" said another.

"Five hundred dollars for him, dead or alive!" yelled one of the sheriff's posse, and the reward caused nearly all in the saloon to rush out and hunt for the fugitive.

But almost as soon as he was out of the saloon Dick Crowell had twenty choice spirits about him, and when the man-hunters, eager for the reward offered, made a rush for the defiant outlaw, his men met them with a hasty volley that killed one, wounded half a dozen more, and made the rest rush for cover.

Jack Hays's men were busy trying to get him in breathing condition again, and the unorganized loungers did not attempt to further pursue the compact and well-armed gang.

The consequence was that when Jack Hays came back to a natural condition Dick Crowell and his men were out of sight.

"Where is he?" roared the sheriff. "Where is that Dick Crowell?"

"Gone!"

"Where?"

None of his men knew.

A voice from the doorway said:

"I know!"

They all looked up.

Ben Bradley stood in the doorway, with Harry Brown, Jack Slasher, and Harley Willis at his back.

"Aha!" roared a dozen men, recognizing the lad.

"That's Ben Bradley!"

"He's a thief!"

"Secure him!"

"We'll string him up!"

Pistol in hand Ben advanced into the room.

"If the man who called me a thief will stand out from the rest," he said, "I'll put a bullet in his heart."

"And if the man will follow who proposes to string him up," announced Harry Brown, in his cool style, "I'll try to do just as much for him."

"And if any galoot in the shebang, or any half-dozen wants me to jump clean down their throats, just let 'em put a paw on the kid," growled out Jack Slasher.

Harley Willis didn't say anything, but he gripped his pistols with a resolute expression.

This determined exhibition had the effect of quelling any intended movement, and then Ben spoke again:

"Where are your brains, my old-time friends? Hasn't the sheriff tried to arrest Dick Crowell, Simpson and the rest of the gang of outlaws and robbers? Can't you see that Simpson and Crowell put up that job on me? Capture the villains, and I'll make them own up at the point of the knife."

"Guess the boy's right."

"It looks like it."

"Sure."

And in a moment his old enemies, who a moment before had been ready to string Ben Bradley up, underwent a change of feeling, and crowded around the boy with outstretched hands.

"Sheriff," said Harry Brown, "I know the retreat of this robber and his men, and if you will follow me we will make them prisoners, or else wipe them from the face of the earth."

"Who are you?"

"Harry Brown, a New York detective."

"And what is your business here?" the sheriff asked.

"I hold a warrant of arrest from the Governor of the State of New York for a party named Walter Storm."

"And do you know where he is?"

"I think I shall find him when you find Dick Crowell," was the reply. "Haste, sheriff, and let us get on after the rascals before they have time to mount horses and get away."

"How many men do we need?"

"Your party and mine will serve the purpose. We have no horses. You are a sheriff

in pursuit of fugitive prisoners. Levy on the town for horses."

"I will."

Within ten minutes after that the sheriff and his posse, numbering fifteen men besides himself, and accompanied by our four friends, rode out of Golden Gulch, well-mounted and well-armed. At a swinging gallop they swept away from the town, Harry Brown leading the way.

On they dashed at a rapid rate, and to Ben, who was riding at his side, Harry Brown said in a stern tone:

"I feel that the end is near at hand."

"The end of what?" asked Ben.

"Of my search; my mission."

"Why, do you expect to find the murderer of my parents?"

"No, I don't say that, but I do expect to find the man who ruined your father and sent him out here to the West, where he met an untimely death, and when I find him I may learn something about the murderer."

"I never saw the man's face," said Ben, "but the mark on his arm may yet bring him to justice. I can always swear to the black cross."

"This man who ruined your father, holds or did hold a fortune, a stolen one, which belonged of right to you and your sister Annie," said Brown. "I did intend to try and make him restore that ill-gotten wealth, but now that neither of you need it I shall say nothing about the money, which probably went long ago."

"I only want revenge," exclaimed Ben, with flashing eyes. "I'm rich, already, without taking the gold from the stream."

At that instant a shout rung out from Jack Hays:

"There they come!"

He pointed to the bottom of a little valley, along which were walking Dick Crowell and his men, burdened with packs of plunder that they were removing from their cave.

Like tigers the mounted men swept down upon them.

CHAPTER XIV.

"SEE, THE BLACK CROSS!"

WHEN the outlaws saw the sheriff's band sweeping down upon them, they were considerably surprised, but, nevertheless, turned to fight.

Their bundles of plunder were cast aside, and they stood upon the defensive.

The parties were about equally matched in point of numbers, the only advantage possessed by the attacking party consisting in being mounted, while the outlaws were on foot.

"Here's a bullet to wing the leader," cried the sheriff.

He took aim at Dick Crowell's right arm, and as the sheriff was a crack shot the outlaw leader would have been rendered useless at the beginning of the fight, had not one of his men happened to move in front of him.

The fellow was pierced through the body by the bullet intended for Crowell's arm, and fell dead.

With an imprecation on his bad luck, Jack Hays gave the order to fire.

A volley from his party rung out, and was almost instantly returned by Crowell's men.

Then the two parties met.

The horses were abandoned, and the dismounted men fought on foot and hand to hand with their eager foes.

In a moment the pure air of the little valley was thick with smoke and dust, while the discharges of weapons, the clash of steel, the shrieks of the wounded, and the groans of the dying, made up a series of sounds and sights not to be easily described.

A gigantic outlaw, armed with a rifle which he had clubbed after first discharging it, was raging around like a fury, and nobody seemed anxious to tackle him until Jack Slasher caught a glimpse of him.

"Oho!" cried the former bully of Golden Gulch. "Come here, you big buck, and hit a feller yer own size."

A moment later they closed in with a shock. Slasher had picked up a gun from the field of battle, and with it met the sweeping blow aimed at him by his opponent.

The force of the blow and the parry knocked the guns from the hands of both combatants.

With a common instinct they gripped their knives, and hacked away at one another like twin furies.

Just at that moment the Sky Traveler came into view, moving majestically toward the battlefield.

Half a dozen rapid parries, a few severe cuts

on either side, and then Slasher knocked his opponent's blade flying from his hand, and drove his bowie through the outlaw's heart.

Ben had dashed fearlessly into the fight, Harley Willis at his side.

The New York detective seemed to be prompted by a desire to protect the young miner, and wherever Ben Bradley went the keen eye of Harry Brown followed him.

A revolver was grasped in either hand by the cool detective, and his aim on all occasions was sure.

An outlaw leaped with an upraised knife upon Ben.

The boy turned pluckily to meet him, but before he could close in with the man, Harry Brown had drawn a bead upon the fellow, and drilled a hole through the rascal's head with a bullet.

"Now, you young whelp!"

It was Dick Crowell's voice.

Ben heard him, and turned to meet the eyes of the outlaw chief turned upon him with an expression of hate.

Crowell's sleeves were rolled up, just as a butcher might do when about slaughtering cattle, and a long knife was fiercely gripped in his right hand.

The once bright blade was now red with blood, and Crowell himself was covered with the crimson stains.

He looked very ferocious as he stood there, but Ben didn't hesitate a minute about meeting him.

"You dog!" he cried, while his trusty bowie-knife flashed in the air. "You thief, who tried to rob me of my good name. You're a man, and I'm only a boy, but in fighting you I am fighting for life and honor, and I'll cut your black heart out!"

The boy was flushed with a just rage as he uttered the ringing words. His powerfully-made form seemed to grow stronger and bigger as he spoke, and his tone and manner almost made Crowell quail.

Then the outlaw chief, who had so long deceived the unsuspecting miners of Golden Gulch, laughed in his well known sneering style and made a slash at Ben's throat.

The boy parried with great strength, and the blow was turned aside.

A moment later the fire flashed from their blades as they met with a succession of ringing sounds in the air.

Harry Brown had been tackled by two of the outlaws, and had his hands as full as possible, otherwise he might have picked off Ben's opponent with one of his cool shots.

The Sky Traveler had now arrived within a short distance of the battle-field, and was resting motionless a few feet up in the air, and perhaps three hundred yards away.

The jovial face of Dennis Malone peered over the side of the car, and behind the jolly Irishman was to be seen pretty Annie Bradley.

The balloon was maintained at about the one position, and the occupants of the car had a first-class view of the exciting battle.

With great fury Ben and Dick Crowell attacked one another.

The boy was strong, and skillful in the use of the knife, and desperate fighter as Dick Crowell was, he had his hands full when he tackled brave Ben in mortal combat.

Suddenly Ben dodged down to evade a peculiar thrust, and at the same time the bare right arm of his foe went up in the air.

The boy's eyes, glancing upward at the very instant, caught sight of the peculiar mark that appeared upon the white skin of the robber chieftain's arm.

His eyes blazed, his form expanded, and in a piercing shriek, he cried:

"See, the black cross!"

And he pointed an unerring finger at the mark which at once branded Dick Crowell as the murderer of his parents!

So loud and piercing, so peculiar was the cry, that almost all the combatants heard it.

Harry Brown heard it, struck down the man who opposed him with a swift blow, and turned to look at Ben.

He saw the boy; he saw the outstretched, indicating finger; he saw the black cross on Crowell's arm, and then, his voice ringing out in a tigerish cry, he rushed toward the outlaw chief.

But Dick Crowell didn't wait for Brown to reach him.

From the very second when Ben uttered the astonished accusation, a sort of terror had seized upon him, and without waiting to strike again at Ben he turned, and fled from the spot.

He happened to go in the direction of the Sky

Traveler, and a gleam of hope lit up his face as he caught sight of the big balloon.

He bounded toward it, and he ran fleetly, too.

After him came Ben Bradley and Harry Brown, both pale with excitement.

With immense bounds Dick Crowell leaped toward the car.

Dennis saw him coming, and drawing a knife from his hunting-shirt, stood in readiness to meet the desperate-looking man.

But Crowell, who had drawn a revolver, was too quick for the brave Irishman.

He took a hasty aim, firing as he ran, and Dennis Malone uttered a cry, reeled, and fell heavily to the ground.

Plucky Annie Bradley, seeing Malone fall, drew her small but serviceable revolver, and would have rendered a good account of herself had not her foot slipped in the haste of her movement, throwing her to the floor of the car and dislodging the pistol from her grasp.

Lightened by Malone's heavy form falling to the ground, the Sky Traveler would have shot up into the air at once had it not been for the fact that Crowell grasped the car on one side just as Harley Willis, who, seeing that his airship was menaced, had fleetly bounded after the villain, clutched the basket on the opposite side.

Both Crowell and Harley bounded into the car just as the balloon began to rise. In falling Annie Bradley had touched with some weight against the crank controlling the heating apparatus, and the heated gas speedily asserted its ascensional qualities.

The battle, commenced late in the day, had been prolonged until nearly seven o'clock, and the shades of night were beginning to fall when the balloon ascended with its three occupants.

Actuated by a common impulse, Harley and Crowell leaped toward one another, both armed with knives. As frequently happens in knife combats, both combatants made a quick clutch for the right wrist, and, as luck would have it, they both succeeded in obtaining the desired hold.

Then, in the gathering darkness, and while the balloon was sailing along to unknown parts, the mortal foes struggled for the mastery.

It was a full-grown man against a boy of eighteen, but the youngster possessed muscles and sinews of steel, and the battle was an even one.

In the gathering darkness they fought on, twisting here and there over the floor of the car, while the Sky Traveler continued on its way.

In twisting hither and thither the struggling opponents suddenly collided with the electrical apparatus that served to expand or contract the gas.

The connecting tubes were broken and in an instant a flash issued from the bottom of the silken bag.

"Fire!"

It was Annie who uttered the cry.

The lower part of the immense silken globe was in flames. This was a common enemy, a terrible foe to all three, and as if by mutual consent Harley Willis and Dick Crowell let go their hold upon one another and turned to fight the fast-increasing flames.

But there was little that they could do, now that the fire was started. The hot tongues of flame came down toward them with scorching effect, and Harley realized that their situation was one of extreme danger.

He did not know how high up in the air they were, nor what sort of landing-place stretched below. There was one means of obtaining information, and Harley adopted it.

"The balloon is losing gas rapidly and descending," he muttered. "The great danger is that we shall be scorched by the fire long before we touch the earth. I must see what is below us."

He caught up a torch, lit it, and with a gentle toss threw it over the side of the car. He watched it until it disappeared very suddenly from his sight, and then turned to the girl.

"Annie."

"Yes."

"Will you trust your fate to me?"

"I will. Do as you think best. I am sure that we are doomed if we stay much longer in this car."

"Then come."

He opened his arms, and with perfect confidence Annie crept within his strong embrace.

Crowell, as though paralyzed with fear, had been stupidly watching the flames, but when he saw Harley make a movement as though to leave the car, he bounded upon him with a

savage exclamation. He was too late, however, to arrest the progress of the young aeronaut.

With Annie Bradley clasped firmly in his arms, Harley Willis leaped from the balloon.

Swiftly they descended through the air, and after plunging through perhaps sixty feet of thin air, they broke through the surface of a cool body of water, and darted quite a number of feet beneath the surface. They came up together, clasped in a close embrace, and like the expert swimmer that he was, Harley shook the water from his head and face and struck out with his right hand, keeping his left arm clasped about the slim waist of his adored companion.

"Let me go," said Annie.

"Why, we're in the water," returned Harley.

"I know that."

"You'll drown."

"As I am able to swim a mile or two with ease," exclaimed Annie, "I don't think I'm in much danger of drowning."

Thereupon Harley Willis let go of her, and she began swimming by his side with the long, graceful strokes of a practiced swimmer.

"Annie," said Harley, "we are in a body of water, some miles, I don't know really how many, from the valley where the battle took place. Can you remember any body of water within a few miles of Golden Gulch?"

"Why, yes," returned Annie. "We are in Dead Man's Lake. That's the only body of water in this vicinity."

"And how big is it?"

"Well, it's a good many miles long, and from shore to shore at some points is fifteen to twenty miles."

"Then," rejoined Harley, "there is really no telling what sort of a swim we are in for, my dear girl. Look at the balloon."

They gazed up in admiration at the huge airship, now a mass of flames that was fast receding in the distance, yet still showing brightly in the darkness of night.

"Tell me, Harley," spoke up Annie as she swam by his side, "how you knew that water was below us when you took that leap with me in your arms."

"The torch told me," was the answer. "Had it fallen upon earth, it would have been broken and scattered in sparks, but its sudden disappearance told me that it had been extinguished by water."

"Suppose it had been a mere pool that the torch fell into, perhaps a foot or two of water, yet sufficient to suddenly put out the flame?"

"Had that been the case," laughingly said Harley in answer. "I don't think you would be putting questions to me or anybody else, Annie."

"We would have died together, Harley," she exclaimed.

"True. Now let us swim carefully, without exhausting ourselves, and try our best to live together," returned Willis.

They had not taken more than half a dozen strokes ere a familiar sound came to their ears.

"Hist!" warily ejaculated Harley.

They both stopped swimming, and then listened intently for a repetition of the sounds that had struck upon their ears.

Again they came, the sounds made by oars working in rowlocks, and not very far distant.

"Hail them!" suggested Annie.

Harley lifted up his voice in a stentorian shout that could have been heard half a mile over the water:

"Hello!"

There was no answer, but the noise made by the oars at once ceased. Harley took in a deep breath, and again sent forth a loud hail:

"Hello-o-o!"

No answer, and not a sound came to their ears. Annie, with the quick wits belonging to her sex, guessed at the reason of this unnatural silence.

"Harley," she whispered.

"Yes."

"That must be one of the outlaws."

"And he's afraid to answer, because of any chance of recapture?"

"Exactly."

"You must be right," decided Harley. "I am sure the outlaws were routed, and they must all be fugitives. Annie, I'm going to have that boat."

"I'll help you."

"Plucky girl! Come on."

They could dimly discern the shadowy outlines of the boat many feet away, and soon, swimming with soft, noiseless strokes, they made out the form of a man sitting bolt upright in the craft.

Harley whispered in Annie's ear, and then they swam away to either end of the boat, trying to keep under water most of the time.

A moment later the boat rocked with a violent motion. The man in it dropped his oars and tried to save himself by madly clutching at the gunwales, but he was too completely overbalanced to save himself from falling.

Out of the boat he went with a heavy splash, and Harley, clutching one of the oars, leaped into the boat with it in a style possible only to a nimble and skillful athlete.

"Oh-h-h!" spluttered the man who had so unceremoniously been dumped into the water. "Hold on, curse you, and I'll cut your heart out."

Harley would have willingly declined the offer, but Annie was swimming off after the other oar, and he could not leave her. The man with a howl of rage made for the boat, and without waiting to draw a weapon, Harley lifted the oar, intending to use the weapon club fashion.

"Keep out of danger, Annie," he shouted, and then turned to meet his foe.

The fellow had drawn a knife, and was holding it in his teeth while swimming with rapid strokes toward the drifting boat. Harley waited for a good opportunity, and then cracked the fellow over the head with the blade of the oar.

The rascal, one of Dick Crowell's men, gave a howl of pain, and then, with a sudden resolve, darted through the water toward the girl. He caught Annie about the body, and in a triumphant manner said:

"I guess you'll take me aboard now. If you don't I'll kill the girl."

That seemed to arouse all the tiger in the young balloonist's nature, and with a cry of rage he leaped erect in the boat, with his knife in his hand.

With an accurate eye he measured the distance, and made the leap, alighting fairly upon the villain's shoulders. He struck with the knife as he descended, and plunged the long blade deep into the man's back.

That ended the matter. The fellow gasped, let go his hold on Annie, and rolled over like a log, while side by side, taking the oar with them, the young couple swam to the boat.

They clambered in, and Harley seized the oars, just as Annie, pointing away to the east, exclaimed:

"Look! the Sky Traveler is coming down, and by the light of the flames I think I can see the tops of trees."

"Then," returned Harley, as he bent to the oars, "land cannot be far away. I'll pull with might and main and try to reach the shore before the balloon comes down. If Crowell isn't killed by the fall, I want a shot at him."

CHAPTER XV. CONCLUSION.

WHEN one is in a balloon, the loss of even an ordinary silver or copper coin, thrown over the side, is appreciably marked by the rising of the air-ship. The reader can, therefore, judge how great a bound the Sky Traveler must have taken when Harley leaped from the car with Annie Bradley in his arms.

The burning balloon made an immense leap when relieved of this weight, and Crowell felt his heart fall as the conveyance ascended. He knew nothing about the management of a balloon, and even had he been an expert aeronaut, the knowledge would not have availed him now.

"My God!" he muttered, shrinking back in fear from the tongues of bright flame that leaped from the bottom of the silken bag, and seemed to dart at him. "I shall be roasted alive in this infernal trap. Why did I ever trust myself in it? Fool that I was to be so frightened, merely because that boy caught sight of the black cross on my arm. I would have been better off had I stuck to my men, taking all the chances."

Too late the villain repented the terrible consequences of his sudden fright upon the field of battle. The fiery, long tongues of flame hissed about him, striking terror to his soul, and causing him to crouch trembling upon the floor of the car.

Several hundred feet the balloon shot up; then the escape of the gas overcame the loss of weight, and the Sky Traveler began to ascend, moving along with a slow current at the same time.

Suddenly the trembling villain's ears were saluted with a loud report. A section of the silken bag had been split by the action of the burning gas.

The escape was now enormous, and the Sky Traveler began to rush down toward the earth with frightful speed, the velocity of the descent blanching the cheeks of the occupant of the car.

"Doomed! doomed!" groaned this cruel, merciless fiend, who could murder in cold blood, but who had not the courage to meet death in any form. "I shall be dashed to pieces. Oh! what am I to do? Ah! I can arrest the speed of the descent by reducing the weight in the car. That's right! I must not lose my head. Presence of mind may save me yet. If I touch the earth without a great shock, I shall not be at all injured. Ha! ha! I may escape and triumph over all my enemies yet, curse them!"

He crawled about the floor of the car on his hands and knees and picked up a heavy book, a telescope, a small compass in a metal box, and several other articles. These he hurled over the side, and was gratified to note that the violent and dangerous descending speed of the balloon was considerably checked by the loss of weight.

"Hurrah!" shouted Crowell, his spirits beginning to rise again. "Keep cool, my lad, keep cool, and we'll beat them all yet. Ah! here is a heavy box. This will help."

He seized the box and hurled it over the side. Again there was an abatement of the descending speed.

A tongue of flame lapped at the rail of the car and set it on fire. With desperate energy Crowell seized the section of rail, and tore it away. Then he hurled the burning wood from him, and actuated by a sudden idea, eagerly watched it as it fell.

Over and over whirled the burning stick, and at length, as Harley Willis's torch had done, disappeared in a very sudden manner, without making a spark.

"I'm over the lake," muttered Crowell. "Oh, how high am I, I wonder? This car is getting unbearable. If I only dared to jump down."

He made a movement to leap over the side, but his cowardly soul was not equal to the unknown peril of the fall. As he drew back, irresolute, a long tongue of flame darted toward him and scorched his cheek. Still he dared not make the leap.

Something brushed against the side of the car, and startled him. He looked up and shouted with joy.

"Treetops!" he screamed. "I am very near the earth, and descending slowly, too. Ha! ha! I am saved, saved! curse my foes! I'll outwit them all!"

As a matter of fact, the battle between the outlaws and the sheriff's command was at an end as soon as the former body lost its leader. When Dick Crowell in his sudden fright dashed away and disappeared with the Sky Traveler, his followers seemed to lose all heart, and in less than two minutes they had ceased fighting and were trying their best to run away.

The sheriff ordered his men to pursue the rascals, and the order was eagerly carried out. The majority of the fugitives, when hard pressed, threw down their arms and surrendered, while some few desperate and hardened ruffians, when brought to bay, fought like tigers and in some instances killed before they were killed.

The battle was over, however, and victory was with the sheriff's party. Jack Hays galloped over the field to where Ben Bradley and Harry Brown were standing, looking up in the air after the fast receding Sky Traveler.

"And after all," exclaimed Hays, "that villain has escaped!"

"Yes," returned Ben, in a troubled tone of voice, "and he's gone off with my sister, too. Of course, he and Harley will fight, and if he gets the best of the battle, what will become of my poor sister?"

"That Willis is a match for him," confidently asserted Brown. "How dark it is growing. In a few minutes the balloon will be out of sight."

"This poor chap tried to save your sister, didn't he?" asked Hays, touching the prostrate form of Dennis Malone with his foot.

"Yes," answered Ben. "Poor Malone! he was a brave fellow, and had he not been killed by Crowell's bullet he would have made short—"

"Tare an' ounz," spoke up a familiar voice from the ground, "I have such a quare headache, so I have. Be heavens, an' if I don't get some whisky, sure me head will sphlit, so it will."

And to the surprise of all, Malone got upon his feet, declaring that he was all right, and only wanted "a wee dhrop o' whisky."

Before they could look into the cause of the

brave fellow's escape, a shout from Harry Brown caused all to look up.

"Great Scott! the balloon is on fire!"

From that time on they did nothing but watch the eccentric movements of the Sky Traveler, as it ascended and descended and moved hither and thither.

They saw it hovering in one particular spot for some time, and rode toward that point, anxiously awaiting some result that would terminate their really terrible suspense.

Thus it happened that when the balloon descended to the earth, quite near to the shore of the lake, all our friends were near at hand.

"Crowell!" cried Hays.

"And alone!" exclaimed Brown.

"He is the murderer of my parents, and his life belongs to me!" gritted Ben, his eyes snapping. "This for the blood of my father and mother!"

And as Crowell leaped from the car when about ten feet from the ground, and tried to make off, Ben pulled the trigger and sent a bullet so close to the rascal's heart that he fell, dying, to the ground.

The next moment, to Ben's great joy, the young aeronaut and Annie rushed within the blaze of light shed around by the burning balloon.

"Saved!" cried Ben and Harry Brown, while Harley Willis was seized upon by Denny Malone and treated to a bear-like hug from the affectionate fellow, who shed tears of joy.

The balloonist was delighted to find that his faithful companion had only been slightly wounded. The bullet which was meant to split his skull, had, fortunately, only grazed his hard head, and stunned him for a few minutes.

Harry Brown and Ben Bradley approached the spot where Dick Crowell lay writhing in his blood.

The dying outlaw looked up, and glanced keenly at Harry Brown.

"I know you now," he said. "You were my little chum."

"Right," said Brown, "and I would have either hung you according to law or put a bullet in your heart had not this brave boy avenged himself and me."

"Avenged you?" cried Ben. "How did my shot avenge you?"

"Because, Ben, I am your brother!"

There was no doubting the affectionate and solemn words, and Ben eagerly seized his hand, while Annie, with a cry of joy, rushed into the outstretched arms of the New York detective.

"Yes, it's all right," spoke up Crowell. "I am dying, and I'll tell the truth. He is your elder brother, and I am your uncle."

"Give me one good drink of whisky, and I'll tell you the whole story."

The dying villain, who seemed to have the pride common to doomed criminals in relating their misdeeds, was given a big drink of whisky, his head was propped up on a saddle, and he began his story, while all, with a morbid interest, stood grouped about the expiring outlaw in silence.

"My name is Walter Storm. I belong in the city of New York. My sister was courted by Mark Bradley, a widower, who had one son, a boy, my own age. There he stands now—the detective.

"I was not more than fourteen, but I had the spirit and brains of a man. I had a row with Mark Bradley, and he whipped me with a lash. He said that I insulted him and my sister, and he made my back red with stripes."

"With my flesh bleeding and my heart on fire with rage, I swore to have his heart's blood for the insult, and as my sister sided with Mark, I swore to kill her, too."

"I was a long-headed boy, and biding my time I appeared to forget all about the matter. Harry, there, who was my playmate, heard me take that oath and it frightened him. He spoke to me about it, and was going to tell his father, but I laughed at the matter, and told him I had forgotten all about it. So Harry left home, thinking all was right, and his folks never heard from him afterward."

"I planned well, boy that I was, and a few years after Mark Bradley married my sister he looked upon me as his best friend, and did not hesitate to take me into business with him."

"Then my chance came. He was a very wealthy man doing a large trade, and I managed matters so well that in less than two years I had ruined him. With all his money in my possession I made off, leaving him hopelessly involved, and without a single dollar to meet the demands of his creditors."

"While leading a gay life in the West I kept paid spies in the North to keep me posted in re-

gard to Mark Bradley's actions. For some time he struggled on in the city, but at last made up his mind to try his luck in the mining regions.

"He emigrated with his family, and I knew every bit of their route. With my money I hired a band of Indians, met the train they traveled with, and killed them both."

"That man struck me when I was a boy; I swore to be revenged, and I kept my word. No man in this world ever striped my back, and—and—"

The blood welled up from the wound in his breast and gushed in a bright red stream from his mouth.

With an ineffectual attempt to speak he gasped for breath, shivered from head to foot, and died.

"So may all villains die," sternly said Harry Brown. "Ben, it was my father as well as yours that he killed, although your mother was no kin of mine, and I look upon you as a hero. It was just that he should fall by the hand of one of the three children of the man he murdered."

"I would have killed him for your sake," said Harley Willis, carried away by his admiration, and then both he and Annie blushed crimson.

There was a growing feeling of love creeping up between these two young people, and they could not disguise it from one another.

The battle-field was cleared, three of the sheriff's men being buried on the spot and a half-dozen wounded carried away.

All of the outlaw band were either dead or prisoners, and the organization that had proved such a scourge to honest miners and travelers, was broken up forever.

Two years later we bring some of the characters of this life-drama before the reader.

Ben Bradley, Harley Willis and his wife—who was once known as Annie Bradley—Jack Slasher and Dennis Malone, live in style in the finest houses in Golden Gulch, and to pass their time agreeably, operate some first class mines in the vicinity.

Harry Brown, whose real name, as the reader now knows, was Harry Bradley, and whose restless spirit would not permit him to settle down, became the sheriff of the county, and from his past record the readers of this true tale will willingly believe that he was a terror to all law-breakers. Of course, as the reader very naturally suspects, they were all made wealthy by the fabulous resources of the gold-bedded stream, which yielded enough particles to make every one of our old friends a millionaire, even to honest Dennis Malone, who, true to his ideas, dyed his hair black, curled his whiskers, and put on a heap of style, which resulted in winning for him a pretty American wife.

And so, with virtue and good deeds rewarded by the power of an all-seeing Providence, and vice and crime punished as the most ancient laws aver they shall be, we bid a friendly adieu to the patient reader and to the story of the Black Cross.

THE END.

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